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ARMOUR WHEREIN HE TRUSTED

FIFTY-ONE POEMS

THE GOLDEN ARROW

GONE TO EARTH

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

POEMS AND THE SPRING OF JOY

PRECIOUS BANE

SEVEN FOR A SECRET



‘He drove like a fiend’ (*p.* 136)

THE ESSENTIAL MARY WEBB

Selected with an Introduction
by
MARTIN ARMSTRONG



Illustrated from drawings by
NORMAN HEPPLÉ
and
ROWLAND HILDER

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

The Golden Arrow

FIRST PUBLISHED 1916

Collected Edition 1928 (eight impressions)
Illustrated Edition 1930 (seven impressions)
Florin Books 1934 (six impressions)
Sarn Edition 1937 (twelve impressions)

Gone to Earth

FIRST PUBLISHED 1917

Collected Edition 1928 (fifteen impressions)
Illustrated Edition 1930 (six impressions)
Florin Books 1932 (twelve impressions)
Sarn Edition 1937 (twelve impressions)
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The House in Dormer Forest

FIRST PUBLISHED 1920

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Illustrated Edition 1931 (six impressions)
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Sarn Edition 1937 (ten impressions)
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Seven for a Secret

FIRST PUBLISHED 1922

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Precious Bane

FIRST PUBLISHED 1924

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Poems and The Spring of Joy

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The Essential Mary Webb

FIRST PUBLISHED 1949

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INTRODUCTION

THIS book is an attempt to give a bird's eye view of all sides of Mary Webb's genius. With this object I place at the beginning and the end the greater part of her two novels *The Golden Arrow* and *The House in Dormer Forest*, the first as an example of the power with which she can irradiate her story with the outer and inner light of Nature, the second to show with what vivid, incisive and humorous strokes she can present a heterogeneous company of men and women. Between these two I give selected passages from the other novels and six essays from *The Spring of Joy*, a little book about Nature which contains some of her finest and most characteristic writing. Here and there, between the prose passages I insert one of her poems which, I think, stands out all the more sharply for being isolated. My intention has not been to produce a Mary Webb anthology from which the reader can pick and choose (though he may use the book in this way if he cares to) but a display of her work which can best be appreciated by reading the book through from cover to cover.

Mary Meredith was born at Leighton, a small village in Shropshire, on March 25th, 1881, and she lived in the county, with only one or two short intervals, for the whole of her life. Her father, George Edward Meredith, was of Welsh descent; her mother the daughter of an Edinburgh doctor. In 1912 she married Henry Bertram Law Webb.

The whole of her work was produced in a dozen years. She was already thirty-five when her first book, *The Golden Arrow*, appeared, and she died at the age of forty-six in 1927. On reading her books again I am impressed most of all, as I was at first, by the richness and intensity of her description of the natural scene. In each of her books the reader is made to see and feel the little tract of England which it so vividly conjures up, with such intensity, that he inhabits it, under all its changing weathers, from beginning to end of the story. G. K. Chesterton, in his introduction to *The Golden Arrow* in the *Collected Works*, defined her presentation of Nature very clearly by comparing it with that of the poet A. E. Housman. "The Shropshire Lad," he wrote,

threw on all objects of the landscape a hard light like that of morning,
in which all things are angular and solid; but most of all the grave-
stone and the gallows. The light in the stories of the Shropshire Lass,

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is a light not shining on things, but through them. It is that mysterious light in which solid things become semi-transparent; a diffused light which some call the twilight of superstition and some the ultimate violet ray of the sixth sense of man; but which the strictest rationalist will hardly deny to have been the luminous atmosphere of a great part of literature and legend. In one sense it is the light which never was on sea or land, and in another sense the light without which sea and land are invisible; but at least it is certain that without that dark ray of mystery and superstition there might never have been any love of the land or any songs of the sea.

That is why we emerge from a reading of *The Golden Arrow* or any other of the novels purged and refreshed as from long days of walking through violent storms and glittering sunshine in remote country places. The characters in her books are an integral part of Nature, and Nature is an integral part of them, and the reader, too, seems to lose himself, or find himself, in this larger life. It is because the country and the people about which she wrote were her own, intimately known to her, that the stories of her novels, though highly romantic, and her feeling for Nature, though intense to the point of mysticism, are so convincing. Like Hardy's minor characters, those amusing, pathetic, highly characterized rustics of the Wessex scene, Mary Webb's are a living growth of the soil of Shropshire and, like Hardy's, humorous, pathetic and entirely real. They are not the inventions of fancy, but people she knew and studied with a sympathetic but sharply penetrating eye. It is the same with her attitude to Nature; though she expresses it sometimes with elaborate intensity, there was nothing literary in its origin. It sprang from her deepest feelings. When she was living for a while in London the sense of exile would sometimes become unbearable and she would pack a bag and hurry back to her beloved Shropshire. Nor was it only the grander aspects of Nature that enthralled her. As the reader of her books soon discovers, she had an eye of almost microscopic keenness for minute details — the centre of a small flower or the curve of an insect's wing. She told me once that she had never taken to smoking because she was afraid she might lose the power of enjoying the scent of flowers, and she could certainly detect an exquisite perfume in flowers which, for most of us, are scentless. This preoccupation may sound like an affectation, but in her it was perfectly genuine.

The way in which she composed her novels accounts for their richness and intensity, though not for the sharp and delicate style of so much of

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her writing. To say that she wrote them at a great speed is true, but misleading, for by the time she began to put pencil to paper much of the work was already done. When she had found a theme, she brooded over it, lived in it, for a long time and, in the later stages of its development at least, talked about it volubly. Whether or not she made notes I don't know. But it was not until it had crystallized in her mind that she began to put it down, and then she set to work furiously, reeling off a surprising number of pages in a single day's work. Her normal handwriting was small and neat, but under the stress of composition it became large and sprawling, though never, I think, difficult to read. That rich, precise style of hers, one would have guessed, must have been the result of a slow and scrupulous selection of words and phrases, but, as far as my knowledge goes, it was not so. Down everything went, pell mell, and though she sometimes spoke of revision, I don't believe the revision ever amounted to much.

I remarked just now that the stories of her novels are highly romantic. What do I mean by that? I mean that she is not a psychological novelist. It is, I think, true to say that in presenting his chief characters the psychological novelist appeals primarily to his reader's intelligence; the romantic novelist to his reader's emotions. Needless to say, unless the psychological novelist succeeds in stirring his reader's emotions through his intelligence he doesn't get very far, and conversely the romantic novelist must not fly in the face of his reader's intelligence. In thinking out his novel, the problem for the psychological novelist is either 'Given such and such a character, what sort of experiences is he likely to undergo?' or 'Given such and such events, what sort of characters will best illustrate them?' He builds up his characters out of his knowledge of human psychology. The romantic novelist, on the other hand, is not primarily concerned with the inner workings of his characters' minds. His aim, in thinking out (or shall we say, here, in *feeling* out?) his story is to present a series of exciting events, submit his characters to them, and see that they react with the maximum of feeling. He does not stop to ask himself if the feelings they display are true to their inner natures for the good reason that he is not very sharply aware of their inner natures. From this it follows that the romantic novelist can guard against awkward questions into the motives and behaviour of his characters from the more psychologically minded of his readers only by providing so rich a setting, so exciting a progress of events and so engrossing an emotional equivalent to them that the reader overlooks, or even fails to see, any psychological deficiency. Mary Webb was eminently equipped for the performance

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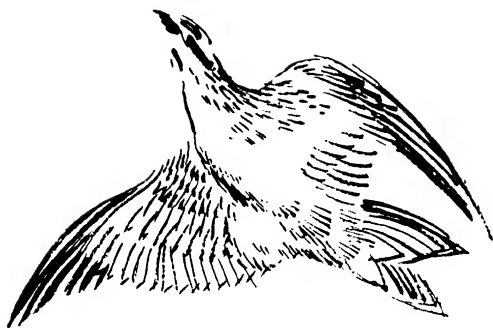
of this sleight of hand, for she was richly endowed, as Robert Lynd points out in his introduction to *Seven for a Secret*, with 'that always fascinating quality of genius — imaginative energy. It is a quality so precious that, when an author possesses it, the waves of criticism beat against his work in vain.' In discussing this novel Mr. Lynd continues:

Mary Webb has in this book created her characters in a high fervour of the romantic spirit. This, in a novelist, is possibly more important than psychology. At least, when it is present, we are less likely to be critical of an author's psychology. We may wonder whether Gillian, at an hour when she was deep in love with Robert Rideout, would have yielded so easily to Elmer on the night of the fair at Weeping Cross, but our doubts are lost in the romance of her subsequent sufferings and salvation. . . . We may not quite believe that Gillian, the egoist, when she finally found safety in Robert Rideout's arms, whispered to him: 'Oh, Robert! Robert! The powers of darkness have lost their hold, and I'm not a child of sin any more'; but because of the vehement good faith with which the fable has been told, we do not quarrel with the author for putting into Gillian's mouth a sentence that rounds it off like a moral.

This defines very acutely Mary Webb's essentially romantic attitude to the chief characters of her novels. But although in her treatment of character she lacked the analytic mind of the psychologist, she was capable, as her readers cannot fail to notice, of remarkable flashes of intuition.

It was natural and inevitable that a writer whose outlook was so essentially poetical should from time to time express herself in verse. When she did so, her delicate awareness of words and rhythms served her well and so did her sharp eye for significant detail. She manages the traditional forms which she almost always used, with the assurance of a skilled craftsman, and each poem quite evidently springs from a genuine poetic impulse. Her poems have the fragrance, charm and delicate workmanship of the smaller works of Schumann and Mendelssohn, but it is true to say that she is most of a poet when she is writing prose. The poem called *Presences* expresses, in little, that sense of something behind outward appearances which, as Chesterton pointed out, is the light in which, in all her work, she presents the natural scene. It makes a fitting prelude to this book.

MARTIN ARMSTRONG



PRESENCES

THERE is a presence on the lonely hill,
Lovely and chill:
There is an emanation in the wood,
Half understood.
They come upon me like an evening cloud,
Stranger than moon-rise, whiter than a shroud.
I shall not see them plain
Ever again,
Though in my childhood days
I knew their ways.
They are as secret as the black cloud-shadows
Sliding along the ripe midsummer grass;
With a breath-taking majesty they pass,
Down by the water in the mournful meadows;
Out of the pale pink distance at the falling
Of dusk they gaze — remote, summoning, chill;
Sweetly in April I have heard them calling
Where through black ash-buds gleams the purple hill.



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'Who was he whose pencil drew the whole round of the sun?'

VIRGIL

MAN can never hope to touch, in things of his making, the perfection of the forms of nature. His most magnificent architecture is dwarfed by the structure of natural things. The purest classic curve — so satisfying because so gentle, so quickening to the imagination because it leads the mind on to wish for the completion of the circle — seems small beside the curve of the horizon. The height and poetry of clustered columns dwindle beside the thousand pillars of the forest. It is not only the immensity of nature that makes the difference; it is something deeper; it is the contrast between creative genius and mere constructive art. Man makes things piece by piece, shaping them from outside, but natural forms come from within; there is no mosaic work; the creation grows up perfect in itself. These things live; though we call trees inanimate, it is really only man's structures that are so; no living germ is in his pillar, as in the heart of an oak. Only in the intangible things of the mind can man

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approach this creative power, and even then it is seldom that a thought springs up in faultless symmetry into music or poetry. The grass-blade rising from its sheath in unassuming perfection is more marvellous in its immanent beauty than the two-edged blade of a legendary angel sword. Where did the first shaping happen? Was the blade there when the sheath began to push through the soil, or when it lay ready to emerge in minute integrity from the root? The same curiosity is awakened by the small brown bud at the end of a chestnut twig in autumn, a little further on than this year's fruit. How much of the future form is hidden in that small sphere? How much embryo tree is wrapped in its inner cases of wool and velvet? What hint of next summer's white chalice and green finger dwells in its innermost recesses? Long before the unfolding of the buds in April, when the downy leaflets uncurl, you can see, if you open one, the compressed cluster — each yellowish ball about the size of a pin-head — which is the future flower, and the faint dawnings of leaves already wrapped in soft wadding. The thought of the sap forming itself into these marvels, of the skilful, silent artistry going on without hands at the end of every bough and at the heart of every root makes the world a place of almost unbearable wonder.

The absolute silence makes this more impressive after one has realized it, but sometimes it makes one forget what is happening. Man's work is accompanied by so much noise; if he desires a silver cup for sacraments, there must go to its fashioning the sound of hammering, the scratch of a chisel, the roar of a furnace; but when the innumerable chalices of the privet are made ready for the hawk-moth's first taste of honey, there is no stir at all. The aisles and transepts of our temples rise with clamour of voices and commotion of labour; even the poetic silence of Solomon's building meant tumult somewhere; but the aisle of pines down a mountain side, the transept of beeches in a valley, rise as softly as a thought into majestic completeness. A crocus achieves her end; her curving cup stands up in the light and air in spite of the weight of inanimate matter pressing on her from all sides during her upward progress; with thin petals folded close in the delicate pointed case, she comes through scathless and silent.

Not only does this formative power triumph over all obstacles in producing its special symmetry, but it evolves countless variations of it from one germ of life — as in the pear-tree's lattice-work of little twigs, pillars of trunk and branch, flat oval leaves, round five-petalled flowers, pitcher-shaped calix, pointed seeds and fruit like a falling raindrop.

Stranger than this complexity is the continuity of individual forms. What slumbers in the fourfold seed-case of the beech, and is essentially

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different in result from the embryo in the winged samara of an elm? The beech leaves that Virgil loved before Christianity came into the world throw the same shadows on our churches as they did on the forest altars of Pan. Every year the daisy root sends up its little rayed disk.

When, long ago, Odoric of Pordenone left the snowy Alps for the Himalayas, snow crystals of the same forms still fell round him. These complex and lovely figures, condensing upon their mysterious nucleus of cosmic dust, always keep the same intrinsic structure. Feathered stars, roses set in ferns, rayed trefoils, seaweed-like fronds full of little suns, they have all the same angles and are made hexagonally.

Just as a certain air, introduced continually in a piece of music, expresses the idea of the composer, so this perpetual reincarnation of the same cabalistic signs in nature might help us, if we could gather the scattered meanings, to a clearer understanding of the plasmic force behind them — a force patient and vast, vouchsafing no explanation. In this occult script the world might find a new bible of spiritual enlightenment — a writing, not in fire upon tables of stone, but in subtle traceries on young leaves and buds. Have not all symbolic artists, children, and priests of new religions some intuition of this? For the thought — so dim and so dear — that all fine contours are a direct message from God, is rooted deep in the minds of the simple-hearted, who are the Magi of the world.

We see, now that Christianity has interpreted it for us, the significance of the cross — that monogram of Christ and *cote-armure* of pity, built up somewhere in the branches of almost every tree, stamped in the centre of almost every flower. Humanity had learnt to make the cross long before that mild night when the flocks cried across the slopes of Bethlehem and their keepers whispered of visions. It may be that if Christ had not died, the meaning of the cross would have been revealed in some other way.

The circle, with its segments — curve, crescent, semicircle — is another letter of the multitudinous alphabet. One of the loveliest variations of it is the chalice, where the centre has receded so that the flower is at once round and deep. In all cup-shapes and trumpet-shapes there is the fascination of this remote centre where the heart of the bloom dwells. Two of the most beautiful of these are the white convolvulus, San Graal of the hedges, and the dwale — that lurid amphora where the death's-head moth, with its weird form and wings of enchanted purples, drinks under the white light of the moon and, if it is touched, cries out like a witch in a weak, strident voice.

The world is based on curves; for each of us morning means the

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growing circle of the sun; we wait in storms for the grand half-circle of the rainbow, which is far more impressive in its governed sweep — embracing the world — than in the flaming of its seven-divided colours. There is nothing so restful as a perfect circle, whether seen, as in the full moon, or implied, as in the young crescent. It is a symbol of things men feel but cannot understand; so Merlin 'made the round table in tokening of the roundness of the world'; so Vaughan saw eternity 'like a great Ring'. Nearly all essential things are round — the perianth of flowers, where the seed is, stars, the window of the eye. Lines, after all, are only for measuring circles; the diameter of the earth is unimportant in itself. Though perspective has an extraordinary power of bringing wonder — hunger for the far away, fear of the future — it must be a long perspective; a piece of road or a tree must attain a certain length or height before it haunts the imagination. But a circle, however small, is immutable, holds infinity; because of this, and because of the implied centre, it is the most perfect symbol of Divinity.

All green things that have to cleave their way come into the light like swords — grass, leaves emerging from the sheath, shoots splitting the bark — all these are pointed. In the outermost branch and the topmost twig of a tree the point sharply defines the limit of the individual form as it stands against the vagueness of air. The point is where thought slips from the finite to the infinite, like a bird balanced on the top of a fir-tree before he trusts himself to immensity. 'At the point of death' has in it something of this idea of the sudden ending of a form, where the topmost shoot of mortality ceases upon the eternal. The circle is static, the point dynamic.

Man finds in the plastic beauty of earth revelations for his practical needs. It is as if the forms of nature waited through the centuries until the moment comes for man to gather the ripe idea in them. The acanthus gave its curve to Greek sculpture. The symmetry of many plants is akin to the spirit of ancient peoples — woad, with leaves like roughly made arrow-heads; golden saxifrage, with its calix like a Roman urn; meadow-vetchling, with its curious stipules like spearheads locked in conflict. Wandering once in June over some Roman ruins in an English field, I was struck by the strange kinship between the plants that now carpet the place and the men who once lived there. Perhaps some Roman, gathering saxifrage for medicine, wondered at the perfection of the little cup, and designed one like it. Or an armourer, looking idly at the lathyrus stipules, may have gained from them the idea for a new kind of spear. Earlier still, a British boy plucking woad may have chipped an arrow-

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head in imitation of it. In the hot silence of the broken walls the saxifrage cup was as redolent of Rome as the glass urn that was found buried there; the lathyrus leaves, like spears and swords among the scarlet banners of the poppies, recalled the glory of cohort and legion.

To know the beauty of earth's lineaments, one must watch them through the seasons. Spring is the time of points and immature half-rounds, when everything is folded. There is a gradual thickening of outline, a massing of shapes, a growing indefiniteness of branch and twig. The intrinsic structure of winter is being veiled by the new, extrinsic forms. Leaves cover the bare hawthorn; flowers foam over the leaves. Then comes summer; the underlying frame is obliterated. When the woods are flooded with bloom, the leaves are almost unnoticed; when the country is aswing with music and alight with colour and the fields are full of seeded grass, the curves of the flower are softly effaced and rounded into the regnant fruit. Then autumn sends a wind in the treetops; twig after twig emerges from the ramifications of foliage; the little birch discards her last raiment, and stands erect in essential beauty with every graceful branch delicately outlined on the sky; the ash looks as fine as maidenhair with its intricate traceries interspersed with brown samaras. The most ethereal forms belong to winter; hers is the beauty that the leaf has when substance and sap are gone and only the frail white outline remains. This is the best time to learn the proportions of things. The lack of this period of stern outline must make a difference in the character of the inhabitants of lands that never know any cessation of luxuriance. In a winter landscape; especially in a wood — there is the same kind of purity that the Greeks saw in the unclad human form; it is like a young athlete, ready for racing, with his flowing garments flung aside. It is an education in restraint; after seeing it, one cannot forget the fine severity beneath all natural beauty.

There is no impressionism in a tree or a hill; under the irregularities of colour, the splashes and brilliant gleams, is the line-perfection in which the impressionism of art fails. An artist can transfer the acacia to canvas in a series of green and white dots and blurs, but he does not achieve all the beauty, for beneath the tree's arborescence is the fineness of an etching. The knowledge that under the chestnut's thick curtains and the aspen's tremulous foliage is a faultless frame gives the trees an honour beyond mere surface beauty. It is this austerity in even the airiest thing, like a butterfly's wing, that makes the study of form ennobling. We do not know why the springing straightness of a bough, the cup-like hollow in an apple petal, the gentle curves that meet at the end of a laburnum leaf,

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are so lovely; we only feel their delight. It may be because in all these shapes there is nothing extraneous, nothing unfinished. The flower has no unnecessary petal; the birds' homes are wholly complete.

We can gain a grasp of this wonder of structure from a seed of groundsel or a sparrow's feather picked up in the street; for a spray of plummy meadowsweet or one dandelion flower is a poem in itself, and the said particle is complex, curiously fashioned and polished. The triangles, ovals, trefoils and eared circles of pollen are minutely perfect. The pollen grain of chicory — an outer and inner hexagon united by rays — is a rose-window in a shrine of lapis lazuli. It needs no light behind it, for it illumines itself. Within is no mere painting, but a powerful principle, an active creature, the architect of next year's sky-blue temple. There is a striking unity in some flowers between the shape of the pollen grain and that of the calix and corolla. The open chicory flower and the pollen grain are both polygonal and rayed from the centre. The pollen grain of the passion flower — like a round filigree box with a lid — is almost exactly the same in construction as the centre of the flower with its enamelled cut-work of stamen, stigma and filament.

Apart from colour, form is awe-inspiring because it seems to be the outcome of mind alone. The marble whiteness and stillness of a statue, and the greatest of Greek tragedies — these strike coldly on the heart; for their creators were occupied with form and intellect to the exclusion of more emotional things. A skeleton is terrifying for the same reason. At the thought of the mountains in the moon, and of all places of a kindred desolation upon earth, we tremble; in these majestic and gloomy formations no stir or gleam hides from us the fearful vision of what the world might have been if its economy had not included the kindly and comforting developments of life — motion and colour.

The forms of nature seem to speak of the ageless and omnipotent life of their Cause, who formed the round reed in the marsh for the music of Pan, the rugged upland tree for the cross of Christ. Man's ingenuity cut and notched the reed for joy and bound the wood straitly for pain; but the hollow reed and the ash tree were not of his shaping any more than the wild melody of the syrinx or the magnificent silence of Calvary were of human impulse.

THE GOLDEN ARROW



CHAPTER I

JOHN ARDEN's stone cottage stood in the midst of the hill plateau, higher than the streams began, shelterless to the four winds. While washing dishes Deborah could see, through the small, age-misted pane, counties and blue ranges lying beneath the transparent or hazy air in the bright, unfading beauty of inviolate nature. She would gaze out between the low window-frame and the lank geraniums, forgetting the half-dried china, when grey rainstorms raced across from far Cader Idris, ignoring in their majestic progress the humble, variegated plains of grass and grain, breaking like a tide on the unyielding heather and the staunch cottage. Beyond the kitchen and attached to the house was the shuppen, made of weatherboarding, each plank overlapping the next. This was lichen-grey, like the house, stone and wood having become worn as the hill-folk themselves, browbeaten and mellowed by the tempestuous years, yet tenacious, defying the storm. Sitting in the kitchen on a winter night, the Ardens could hear the contented rattle of the two cow-chains from the shuppen, the gentle coughing and stamping of the folded sheep, while old Rover lay with one ear pricked, and now and then a hill pony — strayed from the rest — whickered through the howling ferocity of the gale.

But now it was July, and every day when Deborah set her mother's milk-pails upside-down on the garden hedge to sweeten, she stooped and smelt the late-blooming white bush-roses. She was gathering them in the honey-coloured light of afternoon, while large black bees droned in

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the open flowers and hovered inquiringly round the close, shell-tinted buds.

'Deborah!' called Mrs. Arden from the kitchen, 'they're coming. I see them down by the Batch Stone now. Eli's walking as determined-angry as ever. Making up sins for other folks to repent of till he canna see any-thing in the 'orld.'

'Danged if he inna!' said John, going to the window and breaking into the wholehearted laughter of an old man who has never wilfully done wrong or consciously done right; for he was lifted by his simple love of all creatures as far above right and wrong as his cottage was above the plain. His brown, thin face ran into kindly smiles as easily as a brook runs in its accustomed bed. No one minded him laughing at them when they saw the endless charity of his eyes, which were set in a network of fine lines, and were wistful with his long gazing into oncoming storm and unattainable beauty and the desperate eyes of his strayed and sick sheep.

'Put out a bit of honey, Mother!' he called, as his wife set out the old cups and saucers painted with dim and incorrigibly solemn birds, that made the dresser look like an enchanted aviary.

'Oh! John, you spendthrift! And not but a pound or two left of the last taking,' said Mrs. Arden. 'It's only Eli and Lil, after all.'

'Well, Mother,' said John, 'Eli's got no honey in his heart, so he mun have some in his belly, whether or no!'

Deborah had gone out on to the green hill-track, mown by the sheep until no millionaire's lawn could be smoother. Folk to tea was a great event, for here it was only in the summer that the hamlets could link hands over the ridges, the white blossom flow up from the plains till it almost met on the summit, the farmer's wife on one side of the ridge walk over to see her sister on the other side.

'Well, Deborah!' said Eli, as she met them, 'I see you'm going the broad road. Ribbons and fanglements! Aye! The 'ooman of Babylon decked herself for the young captains—'

'I think she looks very nice, Father,' said Lily, in the habitually peevish tone of a snubbed child. She took stock of Deborah jealously; detested her for having blue ribbon and a normal father; and put an arm round her waist to disguise the fact and to see if Deborah had made her waist smaller by tight-lacing. Deborah received the embrace with the unquestioning gratitude and ineradicable reserve with which she met all demonstration. Without realizing the fact, she disliked being touched; physical contact with anything larger and less frail than a bee or raindrop worried her. At night, when she and Joe and the old folk gathered round the fire, she

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would draw her chair a little apart, unaware that she did so. Warm-hearted and without egoism, she was yet one of the women who are always surrounded by a kind of magic circle. The young men who leant on meadow bridges — locally known as 'gaubies' bridges — on a Sunday, when she paid a rare visit to the plain, did not call after her; when Joe's friends came in for the evening, she thought they disliked her; she wished she were more like Lily — who boxed their ears and had her feet heavily stamped on under the table and once had an April-Fool postcard with 'I love you' on it.

'I suppose it's because of Lily's golden hair,' she once said to her mother wistfully. Her own was brown as a barkstack, and had the soft sheen of a wood-lark's wing or a hill-foal's flank.

'No danger!' said her mother tartly. The more she loved people the more tart she was, until her husband used to say ruefully that he wished she was a bit more callous-like to him, for he felt like a pickled damson.

'What's a fellow want with nasty straw-hair for his chillun? You needna "O Mother!" me; folks *do* have chillun — as I know full well, as have give their first wash to a power of 'em, *and* the lambs (poor things!) — not as I wash them, being woolly, and I'd as soon bring a lamb into the 'orld as a child, for if they hanna got immortal souls they're more affectionate than most that has — but as I was saying, chillun there are, and married you'll be, and chillun you'll have, and they won't have straw thatch like Lily's, but nice cob-coloured yeards with a polish on 'em! Dear 'eart, she's gone!'

As Deborah came with Eli and Lily along the sward, all the sheep, newly shorn and self-conscious, arranged themselves like a Bible picture, with the three figures as shepherds. The 'cade' lambs, remembering Deborah's punctual feeding, and feeling an aura of protection about her, pressed round.

'Dirty beasts!' said Eli, sweeping them back with his stick. 'Not but what that black 'un will bring a good price come Christmas.'

'Dunna clout 'em, Eli!' came John's voice from the threshold. 'I'd liefer they'd come round me than find the pot of gold under the rainbow. They be my friends, as you know well, and they'm not speechless from emptiness of heart. No, sorrowful and loving they be.'

'Meat, that's what they be,' said Eli.

'Deb!' whispered Lily, 'isn't he an old beast? I hate him mo're every day, and I wish I could get married — that I do!'

'Oh, Lily!'

'Not that I like sheep myself,' Lily continued, 'soft things! But as for



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him, he's always growling and grudging and taking on religious all at once.' Her lips trembled. 'I hanna got so much as a bit of ribbon, nor nothing,' she said.

Deborah stooped and gathered a red rose — the only one.

'There! that's nicer than ribbon, and Joe likes red,' she said with a smile.

Lily simpered.

'Where be Joe?' she asked negligently, hiding her wearing anxiety as to whether Joe would be present at tea or not.

'Haying at the Shakeshafts', but it's so nigh that he comes back to his tea now and agen.'

Colour came into Lily's pale face. Her eyes shone. She was vital for the first time that afternoon.

'Can I come to your room and do my hair, Deb?' she asked. 'The curls do blow about so. I should think you're glad yours is straight, and never blows out in curls?'

Deborah was looking at a giant shadow — the astral body of the gaunt Diafol ridge, blue-purple as a flower of hound's-tongue — which stretched across the hammock-like valley towards their own range at this time in the afternoon.

'Aye,' she said absently.

'Do you like these sausage-curis at the back, Deb?' asked Lily, thirsting for female praise, since the more nerve-thrilling male was not obtainable.

'Aye,' said Deborah again.

Lily stamped.

'You never looked, Deborah Arden! I suppose you're jealous.'

Deborah awakened from her dreams and smiled.

'I was thinking that shadow was like a finger pointing straight at you and me, Lil,' she said. 'A long finger as you canna get away from. What does it token?'

'Weddings!' said Lily, thinking of Joe and the underclothes she would buy in Silverton, and blushing at an impropriety that Deborah would not have seen.

'Maybe — or maybe summat darker,' said Deborah.

'Oh, don't be so creepy and awful, Deb!' And Lily pulled her blouse tighter to show the outline of her figure better — a very pretty, pigeon-like outline, so poor Joe thought later, desperate at Lily's provocative hauteur.

'Deb!' shrieked Mrs. Arden up the breakneck stairs, 'take the tray and ring up Joe, there's a good girl.'

'Me too!' cried Lily, taking the largest tray.

So out ran the two maidens, their frocks flying, nimble feet scudding

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over the springy turf, armed with green trays painted with fat roses, beating on them like bacchanals with pokers. They were quite grave and earnest, quite unaware that they were quaint, beautiful, and the inevitable prey of oncoming destiny.

A brown figure appeared far down a cwm of the steep hillside, at first indistinguishable from the blurs that were rocks and sheep, climbing the hot, slippery hill.

Lily watched with veiled eagerness, leaning out to this new force of manhood with no thought of it, but with the complete absorption in her own small, superficial ego in face of great primeval powers which make a certain type of woman the slave of sex instead of the handmaid of love. She was what is called a good girl, thinking no worse thoughts than the crude ones of most farm women. She was insatiably curious, and was willing to face the usual life of the women among whom she lived in order to unravel the mysteries of the Old Testament and other Sunday meat of the congregation at her place of worship. She was full of tremors and flushes — the livery of passion — yet incapable of understanding passion's warm self. She was ready to give herself as a woman for the sake of various material benefits, with a pathetic ignorance of her own unthinkable worth as a human being. She was rapacious for the small-change of sex, yet she would never be even stirred by the agony of absence from the beloved.

Deborah went indoors like a good sister, and left Joe to his fate.

In the calm, brown kitchen, alive with the ticking of the grandfather clock, Mrs Arden's alarum and John's turnip watch — which, when wound, went stertorously for an hour and then stopped — the three old folk, like wintered birds, sat round the board in a kind of unconscious thankfulness for mere life and absence of pain. Eli always had the robin cup, the robin being the only bird that did not rouse him to hoarse grumblings about pests and vermin. In the dim past his mother had cajoled and threatened him into a belief that the robin was a sacred bird; so sacred it was. A robin might perch on his spade while he stooped to shake potatoes from the haulm, and he only gave it a crooked smile. Any other bird he would have stoned. They drank from the cups, where the gold was worn at the rim, with a kind of economy of pleasure, as if they felt that the cup of life was slowly emptying, the gold upon it growing faint.

'Honey, Eli?' said John. 'There's a bit of acid in to suit your taste!' By such mild satire he comforted himself for the heart-sickness often given him by Eli's treatment of small creatures.

'Here's our Deb,' he said, with his unfailing delight in his children. 'Where's Lily?'

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Mrs. Arden, ever ready to further the designs of nature, kicked him under the table; he gazed at her with steadfast inquiry till the truth slowly dawned on him, and the china rattled to his delighted thump of the table.

'What, Joe?' he asked, and let Eli into the secret in a twinkling.

'Ay,' said Eli, with a kind of sour pride, unable to help approving of success, though disapproving of youth, beauty and love. 'Aye, she'm a terror with the men, is Lilian. The mother was the same.' He always spoke of his late wife in the detached manner of one alluding to a cow.

'Eh, well! The dead say nought,' remarked Mrs. Arden, who always had a veiled hostility to Eli.

'And that's a silence we all come to,' said John pacifically. 'Poor Thomas o' Wood's End's gone, I'm told. You'll be making a noration on his coffin, Eli, I suppose?'

'No. I bain't good enough for them seemingly,' said Eli. 'Some young chap's to come as is new in these parts. Foreman at the Lostwithin Spar Mine. Tongue hung on in the middle. All faith and no works, and the women after 'un like sheep at a gap. I shanna go.'

'I'm going,' said John. 'He was a good neighbour, was Thomas. Stood godfather to our Deb, too, when Mother took an' got her named in Slepe Church.'

'Well!' said Mrs. Arden oracularly, 'chapel I was reared and chapel I am. But when it comes to weddings and christenings, you want summat a bit older than chapel — plenty of written words and an all-overish feeling to the place and a good big zinc-lined font. And is the new young man married or single, Eli?'

Eli made no reply — a custom of his when a question bored him, and one so well understood by his intimates that no one dreamt of being offended.

As Deborah sat with the old people, she wondered if the strange experience that had come to Joe and Lily would ever come to her. Would she ever pluck bracken as rosily and earnestly as Lily, waiting for a step — a voice? She felt rather forlorn in the staid environment, rather homesick for adventure, yet with the sense of somnolent peace that broods over afternoon services.

Out in the sun Lily pulled to pieces the small, soft fingers of the bracken with her back to the ascending Joe. A hawk hovered overhead, and the snipe that had been bleating ceased and became still. Up from the meadow Joe had left, came faint shouts; microscopic figures moved there. Joe's black hair was stuck with hay, which gave his steadfast face an absurdly rakish air.

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'Waiting for me, Lil?' he asked, his delight overflowing.

'No danger!'

'Oh!' said Joe, crestfallen.

'What are you galivanting here for, when they're haying?' queried Lily, giving him a chance for a compliment.

'Me tea,' said Joe, truthfully but disastrously.

Lily was silent, surveyed his corduroyed and blue-shirted figure with great disfavour.

As he had climbed the slope, there had flickered before him, pale and shaken as the nodding blue heads of the sheep's-bit scabious, a vision of firelight and small faces, with Lily presiding over a giant teapot. For Joe's most spiritual was to some eyes grossly material. His winged desires, his misty gropings after the beautiful were clothed by him in the most concrete images. Therefore, because he loved Lily so much, the teapot of this vision was large enough for a school-trat, larger than any he had seen in the sixpenny bazaar windows last Michaelmas Fair, and the children's faces were quite innumerable. But now, near enough to touch that wonderful blouse of Lily's — a very transparent green butter-muslin made in the latest fashion by Lily and fastened with pins — now the vision went out like a lantern when a blown bough smashes the glass.

'Lil, will you come pleasuring along o' me to the Fair on Lammas holiday?' he asked humbly.

Lily disguised her thrill of joy.

'Fraid I canna,' she said.

'Oh, Lil! And I've saved five shillings on purpose.'

'If so be I came, would you buy me a blue bow?'

'I would that!' said the beaming Joe; 'a whacking big un!'

'Oh, not big — little and pretty. I don't like big things.'

'I be a bit on the big side myself, Lil, but it ain't my fault, and I met be able to keep folk from jostling you — being broad like.'

'If I come,' said Lily, 'will you bring Deb too?'

'Deb? Lord o' mercy, I dunna want Deb.'

'It's not proper 'ithout,' said Lil.

Joe flushed redder than he already was. The mere possibility of a state of things that could be construed as improper existing between himself and this mystery — this radiant creature that had suddenly appeared out of the chrysalis of the Lil Huntbatch he had known all his life — went to his head like home-brewed.

'A'right,' he said meekly.

'And as Deb would be dull, when we went off together —'

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'Aye,' said Joe with much relish.

'And as she dunna like the chaps about here much —'

'I canna think why — good chaps they be, drawing a straight furrow and handy with the sheep —'

'A girl doesn't think much of that in the man she's going to wed,' said Lily loftily.

'What does she think on? Chapel-going? I'll go to chapel every week, Lil, if you like. I be more of an outside prop than an inside pillar now, but —'

'It doesn't matter to me if you never go,' said Lily. 'But as I said, as she doesn't like them, why not ask that new chap that's come to Lostwithiin yonder — a town chap and very smart, they say. He's going to speak over Thomas o' Wood's End come Sunday; you could ask him then.'

Joe pondered.

'If I do, will you come to chapel along o' me and walk back arm-in-crook and promise faithful to come to the Fair?'

'If you like.'

'What little small arms you'm got, Lil! And shining white, like a bit of spar. I wish —'

'What?' said Lily, trembling with curiosity and delight.

'Ne'er mind,' said Joe; 'come Sunday night, when we're by the little 'ood and it's quiet, maybe I'll say. And now I'll go round by the back and wash me.'

Lily went into the kitchen, thinking how rough Joe was — better than her father, of course, but probably not as nice as the new Lostwithiin foreman, whom she had, with such well-laid plans, arranged to captivate. John glanced up at her and remembered his courting days. Mrs. Arden decided to put off pig-killing till Joe should be 'called', in order to have black pudding at the wedding. She also considered other abstruse questions. Deborah felt rather like Lily's aunt, and was very motherly to her, retiring soon at an urgent call from Joe to see to the proper adjustment of his best tie — no mere knot, but a matter of intricate folds of crimson silk embellished with large horseshoes. All the things Joe did and possessed were large.





CHAPTER 2

GOING to church and chapel in the hills implies much more initiative than it does in the plain, within sound of chiming bells and jangling public opinion. Very early on the hot Sunday of the Oration John was about, milking the cows — Bracken and Wimberry — dressing a sick sheep and placing at the back door his daily votive offering of sticks, water from the cwm and vegetables for his wife's cooking.

'Be you going all in the heat, and it blowing up for tempest, father?' Deborah called from her little window, leaning out in her straight calico nightdress — for no human habitation, not even a bird's nest, commanded her cyrie.

'Aye,' said John; 'poor Thomas canna wait. I mun go or fail him.'

There is a curious half-superstitious, half-mystic sense in the minds of some country-folk that the dead need sympathy — perhaps almost food and drink — more in the days before burial than in their lives.

'Is Mother going?' asked Deborah.

'No. She's had a call.'

Every one knew that when Mrs. Arden had a call it meant a small, new force in the world; and all knew the impossibility of gauging its importance, feeling that in her hands might lie the fate of a great man — a Member of Parliament, perhaps, or even a vicar. So a call meant a hasty packing of homely simples, linen, and perhaps a posy; then she started on foot, or was driven by John with Whitefoot.

'I'll come then, Father, sooner than let you go alone,' said Deborah. She combed and pinned up her wing-like hair and took out her best frock

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— an old-fashioned purple delaine sprinkled with small pink poppies — and slipped it over her head. She was transformed from a pleasant girl into an arresting woman. The deep colour threw up into her grey eyes shifting violet lights, gave her transparent skin an ethereal look, burnished her hair. Dark colours were to her what rainy weather is to hills, bringing out the latent magic and vitality. This morning her dress might have been cut from the hills, their colours were so alike. Always dignified in the unselfconscious manner of those who live in the wilds, Deborah was even queenly to-day in her straight, gathered skirt and the bodice crossed on her breast. She put on an apron and ran down.

'Mind you put a bit of mint along of the peas, Deb!' said Mrs. Arden. 'I'll be back when I can.'

Deborah saw her off with due solemnity, in her best bonnet and Paisley shawl — rich with Venetian reds, old gold and lavender. Joe and his bowler had disappeared. Some hours later Deborah and her father set out along the green track over the hilltop, past the little wood of tormented larches and pines that sighed in the stillest weather. Here the hill-ponies gathered in the innermost recesses by the spring that came into the open as a small, vivacious brook. They stamped and whisked at the flies, gazing without interest or fear at the other children of the wild; and John looked at them with the infinite compassion that he felt for all the beautiful, pitiful forms of life.

'What a queer day, Father! — as if summat was foreboded,' said Deborah.

'Aye, there's tempest brewing,' John replied meditatively; 'so bright as it is!'

'It's always bright afore storm, Father, isn't it?'

'Aye. Why, Deb, how bright and spry you be yourself to-day, dear heart! The young chaps'll be all of a pother.'

'It's only my old gown.'

'Aye. But you'm like chapel on Christmas night — lit for marvels.'

The tessellated plain, minute in pattern as an old mosaic, seemed on this fervent day to be half-molten, ready to collapse. The stable hills shook in the heat-haze like a drop-scene just lifting upon reality. The ripening oat-fields, the already mellow wheat seemed like frail wafers prepared for some divine bacchanalia. A broad pool far down among black woods looked thick-golden, like metheglin in a small ebony cup.

As they came to the northerly side of the tableland, Caer Caradoc loomed terrific, gashed with shadow, like a wounded giant gathered for a spring. John dreamed upon it all, leaning on his silken-grey staff of mountain ash.

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'See you, Deb!' he said in the tranced voice in which he spoke but seldom in a year, at which times his listeners stood silent — at gaze like the sheep before something undiscovered — until he suddenly broke off, turned on his heel, and wheeled manure or dug the garden in silence for the rest of the day. 'See you, Deb! The Flockmaster goes westering; and the brown water and the blue wind above the cloud, and the kestrels and you and me all go after to the shippen with the starry door. Hear you, Deb, what a noise o' little leaves clapping in the Far Coppy! 'Tis he, that shakes the bits of leaves and the bits of worlds, and sends love like forkit lightning — him as the stars fall before like white 'ool at shee-shearing. And all creatures cry out after him, mournful, like the o'erdriven sheep that was used to go by your grandfather's forge at Caereinio. And he calls 'em — all the white sinners and the stained mighty ones, and even the little blue fishes in the hill streams. "Diadell!" he calls to the hearts of them; and they follow — ne'er a one turns back — going the dark way. But I see far off, as it met be yonder where the dark cloud lifts, I see summat as there's no words for, as makes it all worth while. There's a name beyond all names, and I'd lief you kept it in mind in the dark days as'll come on you, Deb! For I see 'em coming like hawks from the rocks. And though you be rent like a struck pine, Deb, my lass, mind you of that name and you shall be safe. Mind you of Cariad — for that's how they name him in the singing Welsh — Cariad, the Flockmaster, the won'erful one!'

He broke off.

'Deb!' he said confusedly, touching her arm like a child; 'I mun bide a bit; I'm all of a tremble and a sweat like a hag-ridden pony.'





CHAPTER 3

POISED between the lowland and the heights and now cut out sharply against the coal-black east, like a hot ember in an oven, stood the red-brick chapel. Whatever beauty flowered within to sweeten the stark ugliness of it — creeping up the walls like swift summer vetches, reaching out determined tendrils towards the illimitable — none was visible without. It stood in a yard of rank grass where Thomas o' Wood's End lay in an open grave of baked earth. It was squat, with round-topped windows too large and too many for it, which caricatured those of Pisa Cathedral. Its paint was of the depressing colour known among house-painters as Pompeian red. The windows had black rep curtains and frosted lower panes to defend the young women in the window pews from the row of eyes that came up above the window-sills at dusk like stars, when the unrighteous outside stood on a ledge and pressed their faces to the glass. So the chapel stood amid the piled and terraced hills like a jibe. Above the door, with a nervous and pardonable shuffling of responsibility (apparently by the architect) were the words, 'This is the Lord's doing.'

Deborah and her father went in, he with the far look still in his eyes and his large hymn-book with the tunes in it under his arm. To him the place was beautiful, painted in the dim, gold-mixed colours of mysterious emotions, half-realized adventures. On the machine-cut patterns of the panes he had gazed while he dwelt upon the burning wheels of Ezekiel's Vision, the Riders of Revelation. The black curtains had made a background for the cumulative tragedy of the Gospel. The jerry-built walls

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were gracious to him with the promise of many mansions. When they prayed he was always a syllable behind the rest, tasting each word, very emphatic, very anxious not to stress his request for one person more than for another. He sat now with his square high-crowned old bowler on his knees, his red handkerchief spread on it, and the hymn-book open on the top, reading 'The King of Love my Shepherd is,' and seeing with a vividness denied to the lettered and the leisured those illumined pastures and unwrinkled waters where, simple and wise, the central figure of the Fourth Gospel presided.

Deborah looked round surreptitiously and nudged her father.

'There's our Joe! Whatever's come over him? Oh, I see! There's Lily too.'

Joe was broadly radiant. In his buttonhole was an enormous passion-flower, presumably bought for the occasion in the Saturday market; Lily had another, which spread its mystic tracery of purple rings, green and gold flames and blue rays on her passionless breast with silent irony until it withered and she threw it on the manure heap. Lily had trimmed her hat with poppies and corn; one bunch had come loose and drooped over her glinting hair — loose also, and tinting her forehead with creamy gold. She always swayed when she sang, and to-day she looked more reed-like than ever. As the flowering rush in the marsh with its brittle beauty cries to be gathered, so she, with her undulating, half-ripe corn and falling poppies, aroused in the back row of youths such untranslatable emotions that they forgot to place the usual pins for the dairymaids from Long Acre Farm.

The first hymn was over, and still the preacher, who was to conduct the service, had not come. Deborah wondered idly what he would be like and whether he would eat jujubes all the time, as the last visiting preacher did — a practice which, while the jujube was new and ungovernable, resulted in a private interview between himself and the Almighty, since no one could hear what he said. She remembered how, in an earnest moment, he swallowed one whole, and how the horrified silence was only broken by the sullen blue-bottles that could not understand the swing panes of the windows. There was silence now, with shuffling and coughs.

At last there came a sound of quick steps; the door flew open and a man entered — so tall that he dominated the place. His ruffled hair was as gold as Lily's; his excited blue eyes, bright colour and radiant bearing were ludicrously unsuited to his black clothes. Out in the early shadows with a fawn-skin slung from one shoulder, and a flute on which to play short tearless melodies, his vitality would not have seemed so unpardonable. He

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was up the chapel in three strides, and the service had begun. After a time Deborah found herself kneeling with crimson cheeks, no breath, and the knowledge that she could not look at the preacher.

'What's come o'er me?' she whispered to herself. She secretly mopped her face and the palms of her hands; this was observed by Lily, who knelt very straight and gazed through her fingers at things in general, but chiefly at the apparition who was praying for soberness and pardon in the tones of a lover serenading his mistress. When he began the oration, he spoke of death as a child does — quite unable to believe in his own skeleton, coolly sorry for those who were weak enough to suffer such indignity. He was full of the eloquent comfort of one who has never seen the blank wall that rises between the last tremor and the eternal stillness on the beloved's face. He was so sure of himself, God, and the small shell that was his creed, that Mrs. Thomas — who had felt numb since the hollow on the other side of the bed had been vacant — began to cry. Lily also cried — from excitement, and because Lucy Throckton *would* insert her twelve stone of good humour between Lily and the new preacher.

Deborah felt a gathering sense of desolation which, if she had been able to analyse her emotions, she would have known to arise from a new sense of dependency — a disturbance of poise. Towards the end of the service the growling in the east changed to a roar; rain came like a high tide on the black windows; the young preacher stood in a flicker of lightning as though he were haloed for glory or smitten for doom.

After the service they all crowded into the porch and waited for it to clear.

'Now, Joe!' whispered Lily, 'ask him!'

Joe looked reverently but mistrustfully at this new manifestation.

'Mister!' he began. 'Lily wants to know —' He paused, arrested by the rage in Lily's face. 'Leastways, I want to know if you can come along of us to Lammas Fair and keep our Deb company?'

'The lad's gone kimet!' whispered John to Deborah, who was twisting her fingers in dumb misery. The preacher was surprised: but he was sufficiently educated to take a conscious interest in his new neighbours; and he was town-bred, and very excited about country life.

'I should like to, awfully,' he said, with an enthusiasm little to Joe's taste, 'if you'll introduce me to the lady.'

'Deb!' called Joe across several heads, in the voice with which he 'Yo-ho'd' the cattle; 'this gent's coming along of us to Lammas Fair, so you needna be lonesome.' He felt pleased. The task was over; the walk arm-in-crook was to come. He wiped the perspiration of initiative from his

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forehead, unaware of a storm worse than the thunder which was to break on him from the united displeasure of Deborah and Lily.

Deborah, so summoned, could do nothing but come forward. With an effort she lifted her eyes to the preacher's and spoke with dry lips the correct formula: 'Pleased to meet you, I'm sure!'

He said nothing, but stood looking down at her with such frank admiration as even a bridegroom in this countryside does not vouchsafe to his bride; and with a light in his eyes that would have been considered 'Most indecent,' if the onlookers could have found a name for it. As it was they merely fidgeted, while Deborah and the preacher gazed at each other and were intoxicated with a joy new to her though not unsampled by him.

'A fortnight come Tuesday you be at Lane End at ten sharp,' said Joe quite carried away by his own *savoir faire*.

Lily raged inwardly. She was hemmed in by Joe, who could not be made to understand by all her whispers and pinches that he was to introduce her. She trod on his toes with concentrated rage; but his boots were proof against anything lighter than the hoof of a carthorse. She peered round Joe and saw Deborah as none had yet seen her — dissolved in the first tremulous rose-tints of womanhood. She dodged Joe's arm and saw Stephen Southernwood with an expression no woman had yet called up in his face — homage and demand in one. 'Cat!' she whispered, surveying Deborah again. She dug Joe in the ribs with her sharp little elbow.

'Ow!' said Joe.

Meanwhile John surveyed the scene with impartial affection, and the dairymaids murmured seductive 'Don't-ee-nows'! At last the rain ceased as at a signal; steam rose in the sudden yellow light; and they all went home down honeysuckle lanes, across the ridges and round the purple hill-flanks to milk, make love and have their Sunday tea.





CHAPTER 4

DEBORAH and her father returned through the hill gate, going by tracks that ran above steep cwms where threads of water made a small song and the sheep clung half-way up like white flies; past the high springs where water soaked out among the mimulus to feed the rivers of the plain; up slopes of trackless hills, through wet wimberries; across the great plateaux — purple in the rainy light — that stretched in confused vistas on every side, familiar to John as air to a swallow. They passed the small, white signpost that rose from the midst of the westward tableland, as others rose from various lost points in the vast expanses — shepherds' signposts, pointing vaguely down vague ways, sometimes directing people dispassionately between two paths, as if it mattered little which they chose. This one was called the Flockmaster's signpost, and stood in gallant isolation within a kind of large crater, so that when you had read — *'Slepe'* — *'Wood's End'* — and passed on, it immediately disappeared like a ship behind the horizon. At times the sheep crowded round it with stampings and jostling of woolly shoulders; the ponies rubbed against it; cuckoos in the wild game of mating would alight on it with an excited gobble and flash away again. Legend said that somewhere here, long since, the cuckoos met in circle before uttering a note in any field or coppy, to allot the beats for the season. It was told with apologetic laughter by the grandmother of a hill-commoner that on a May night with a low moon you might see from the Little Wood — lone on a ridge — the grey, gleaming ring as from a stone thrown into water. Before the shadows stretched themselves for dawn you might be aware of the clap of wings; might watch the long tails steer to the four winds; might hear from orchards at the valley gates the first warm, linked notes that meant summer.

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They walked in silence. John was quite unaware, now that his rare moment of vision had passed, of Deborah's psychic existence. He was subject to the poet's reaction, and he had no idea that anything had occurred except a storm which might damage the wheat. They came to the slopes of short grass from which the round yellow heartsease was disappearing like a currency withdrawn — as the old mintage of painless and raptureless peace was disappearing from Deborah's being. At the first gate of John's sheepwalk the land slid away suddenly and revealed in terrific masses on the murky west the long, mammothlike shape of Diafol Mountain.

'There'll be more thunder,' said John; 'it's brewing yonder, it'll be round afore dawn.'

'It's raining over the Devil's Chair now,' said Deborah.

On the highest point of the bare, opposite ridge, now curtained in driving storm-cloud, towered in gigantic aloofness a mass of quartzite, blackened and hardened by uncountable ages. In the plain this pile of rock and the rise on which it stood above the rest of the hill-tops would have constituted a hill in itself. The scattered rocks, the ragged holly-brakes on the lower slopes were like small carved lions beside the black marble steps of a stupendous throne. Nothing ever altered its look. Dawn quickened over it in pearl and emerald; summer sent the armies of heather to its very foot; snow rested there as doves nest in cliffs. It remained inviolable, taciturn, evil. It glowered darkly on the dawn; it came through the snow like jagged bones through flesh; before its hardness even the venturesome cranberries were discouraged. For miles around, in the plains, the valleys, the mountain dwellings it was feared. It drew the thunder, people said. Storms broke round it suddenly out of a clear sky; it seemed almost as if it created storm. No one cared to cross the range near it after dark — when the black grouse laughed sardonically and the cry of a passing curlew shivered like broken glass. The sheep that inhabited these hills would, so the shepherds said, cluster suddenly and stampede for no reason, if they had grazed too near it in the night. So the throne stood — black, massive, untenanted, yet with a well-worn air. It had the look of a chair from which the occupant has just risen, to which he will shortly return. It was understood that only when vacant could the throne be seen. Whenever rain or driving sleet or mist made a grey shechinah there people said, 'There's harm brewing,' 'He's in his chair.' Not that they talked of it much; they simply felt it, as sheep feel the coming of snow.

'Aye!' said John, looking across the hammock-like valley; 'there's more

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to come. We's best keep the cows in to-night, Deb, safe at whome out of the storm.'

'Aye,' said Deborah heavily, like one recovering from an anæsthetic; 'safe at whome out of the storm!'

Far along the green path they saw the round form of Mrs. Arden bouncing like a ball; and they could hear the faint, tinny clamour of the tea-tray. Away behind them, against the white sky, they saw the loitering figures of Joe and Lily.

'I thought you'd got struck!' shrieked Mrs. Arden as she approached. She had been in the house for half an hour, and loneliness was torture to her, as to all gregarious natures whose way lies in hill-country.

'Both doing well,' she announced triumphantly; 'only most a pity the poor child's the very spit and image of his father! They're saying down at Slepe as the berry-higgler's coming Friday. I thought to go picking to-morrow, Deb, if so be you'll come. There's a power of folk coming, greedy as rooks in the fowl yard. We'd best be early if we want 'em.'

'Why, Mother! What a pother you be in!' said John.

'All right, I'll come, Mother,' Deborah murmured, cheering up like a wet bee in sunshine under the reassuring influence of the commonplace. This atmosphere Mrs. Arden took with her, as a snail takes its shell; through its homely magic she combated the power of sickness and pain and black terror in many a stuffy little bedroom.

'The kettle's boiling and I've milked,' she announced, 'and all's done, only to scald the tea! And what was the new chap like?'

'No great shakes,' said John.

Deborah went upstairs to take off her best dress.

'What ails our Deb?' Mrs. Arden continued.

'Nought as I know to.'

'What's the chap like to look at?'

'What chap?'

'Why, the preacher! Who else? Don't I know the rest of them back-'erts?'

'Well, he's a likely lad enough.'

'But to look at?'

'Long in the straw,' said John slowly, 'and a yellow head, like a bit of good wheat. And his tongue's hung on in the middle, as Eli said.'

'Oh!' remarked Mrs. Arden comprehensively.

'Where's our Joe?' she added.

John winked.

'Bringing his girl along.'

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'Well!' said Patty, 'Lily's a tidy girl enough, I've nought agen her—barring Eli.'

'Talk of the devil!' said a sardonic voice at the door. 'Where's my devoted darter?'

'Coming along, Eli.'

'A good hiding! That's what she wants, to take the Owd 'un out of her. But I'm too kind to her,' said Eli. 'Left the milk in the pails, she d d, out in the sun. Never so much as put it in the dairy. Left it to sour.'

'Laws me!' murmured Patty economically.

'Well, well! We're only young once,' said John.

'I'll learn her to be young!' Eli shouted savagely. 'Trapesing along of your Joe and bedizenning herself like the whore of Babylon.'

'Now, Eli!'

'And as if that's not enough there's my new shed, as cost me five a d thirty shillings, struck!'

'You don't say! Anything killed?'

'There wasn't nothing in it, or there would have been.'

'Well, well! And you one of the saved an' all!' John's voice had a dash of irony in it, although he did not doubt Eli's state of grace.

'It inna me,' said Eli, 'it's the girl. It's a sign from the Lord that she mun be chastened. God's will be done!' he added piously, fixing a scarifying gaze on the truant Lily as she came in.

'What about them six quarts of milk you left to sour?' he asked.

'There, there!' said Mrs. Arden; 'dunna miscall a girl before her chap, Eli.'

Lily, flushed, terrified of Eli's bitter and silent rage, had spirit enough to look at Joe witheringly and remark—

'He's not my chap. He's a great gauby.'

'Laws me!' said John helplessly. 'Mother, I thought you said —?'

'Hush your noise!' snapped Mrs. Arden.

Deborah, softly laying away the gown that had clothed her during an experience for which she found no name, heard angry tones in the usually quiet kitchen, harshness in the Sunday peace.

'Is that you, Lil?' she called.

'Yes. Oh, Deb!' said Lily, coming up breathless and raging; 'isn't Joe a great gomeril?'

'But whatever put it into his head?' asked Deborah.

'Oh, he asked me to go to Lammas Fair along of him,' Lily explained carelessly, 'and I thought you ought to have a bit of a randy too, so I said to Joe to get the preacher to keep you company.'

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'While you went along of Joe?'

'Yes. Well, Joe *is* a softie! Saying I wanted the chap!'

'Saying *I* wanted him!' Deborah added, 'and I not so much as set eyes on him.' She found herself crimson.

'How you do feel the heat, Deb!' Lily's voice was rather spiteful. 'Now I never colour up, not if it's ever so. Being slimmer than you, I suppose. But the way he ups and says it! And the girls from Long Acre drinking it all in like brandy-cherries. And that fat Lucy!' Lily began to giggle. 'And Joe so pleased with himself — smiling all o'er! It took me all the way back to learn him what a softie he was.'

'Poor Joe,' said Deborah.

'Lilian,' Eli's voice came raspingly from below. 'What saith the Book of the tiring of hair and putting on of apparel?'

Lily knew what the rasp and the text meant, and she trembled. Any bush in the rain.

'Joe,' she said, running down and smiling on that crushed and sullen youth; 'would you like to come along a bit of the way?'

Joe considered whether Lily with Eli attached was enough to sacrifice his hurt pride for.

'No, I wunna,' he said flatly. He had meant so well! He was quite sure that he had done well. What the tantrum was about he had no idea. Deborah seemed angry with him also, for some of the conversation had floated down. He was obstinately determined to be dignified. It was not surprising that he could not understand what he had done, for his crime in Deborah's eyes was that a strange man had made her feel 'hot all o'er', and in Lily's that the said stranger had not fallen in love with her.

From the dresser the bird cups presided over the scene, each one a little aslant as it hung by the handle, like a speaker leaning to his audience.

'Well, good-night, both,' said John, as the ill-matched couple went out; 'and God be with you,' he added, as if he felt a need for some extra blessing.

'And with this house, leastways this small cottage,' said Eli with the acidity of raw sloes.

'Goodness gracious heart alive!' cried Mrs. Arden, sitting down in a heap on the creaking sofa. 'What's come o'er the folk? Why, you make more ado, every man-jack except Father here, of going to meeting for an hour than Jane Cadwallader made of bearing a man child! Dunna fret, Joe! She'll be all right to-morrow-day. And Deb!' she raised her voice and put a twist on it so that it might negotiate the crooked stairs, 'what's come to you comes to all, and if it didna, you'd fret.'

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Father and son looked at each other, mystified by the subtleties of femininity.

'Well,' said John, 'I'm going to look the sheep and see what the storm's done for me. Coming, Joe? Coming, Rover?'

They tramped over the wimberries, just losing their first startlingly bright green. John pondered.

'If I was you, Joe, lad, I'd go a bit of a walk round Bitterley to-night. I dunna like Eli's look! and she's a little small thing — tongue or no tongue.'

'Oh, aye!' said Joe awkwardly; 'I thought to go. Be that one of the last lot of lambs, dad?'

An hour or two later, having criticized every sheep findable by Rover, they returned. John went in, grateful for the rosy firelight on the fires, for evenings are chill here even in July. Joe stood lost in thought. Why should he go? Sullenness came over him. But her pretty arms, her little ways, and Eli mad with her — and she had asked him so pleadingly! Yes, he'd go! All in a moment he felt a need of haste — wanted to be there at once. It was a good way to Bitterley — through the Far Leasowes along Hilltop Road, down Deadman's Lane and over Bitterley Hill. He ran to the stable, bridled Whitefoot, sprang on bareback and was away with a rattle of stones amid a flying crowd of sheep before the rest of the family got to the door. He galloped furiously over the rough tracks with a heavy feeling that he could not understand, a sense that he must hasten more than he had ever done in his life.



CHAPTER 5

BEFORE Eli and Lily had gone many steps from the Ardens', he turned stealthily to see if any one was watching them. Seeing that no one was, he stopped.

'Take them poppies and that good corn out of your hat,' he said.

'Oh, well,' said Lily, with an attempt at lightness, 'they'm dead, anyway.'

She took them out.

'Stamp on 'm,' said Eli.

'But — how soft!' Lily objected.

Eli seized her arm, twisting it slightly, and she trod on the flowers.

'Never no more,' said he. 'Your hat's good enough for such as you with no trimmin'. It did for your mother. And you'm not as good-lookin'. Such a figure of fun as you look — I marvel as Joe'd think on you, with straws and old dead flowers hanging round you, and your hair all wispy, and a smudge on your nose —'

Lily began to cry.

'And that ondecnt bodice!' he went on. 'You'm no better than you should be, showing yourself half naked.'

Lily began to run, stopping her ears. This was worse than any of their homecomings, for her father had never before had a barn struck, and she had never been quite so daring in her attire. Eli's crafty face, with its downward seams from the mouth and nose and the two long, yellow teeth over the lower lip, was dark red with passion. His plain living, his long prayers, his loud confessions of sin, his harsh treatment of himself

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and his unquestioning meekness to the God he believed in (a vengeful, taloned replica of himself) — all these things had to be paid for by some one. Lily and the creatures at Bitterley Fields paid — Lily with some justice, for she was quite selfish and very irritating, the creatures with none. A few times in the year, when things had gone wrong, the lust of torture came upon Eli, and the contemplation of a deferred and somewhat problematical torment of the wicked (*i.e.* the not-Eli) in hell-fire could not slake it. At these times he exhibited the subtlety of a woman in finding weak points wherein to stick pins — a subtlety inherited by Lily. The ironic remarks of everyday life — the commonplaces of rudeness — gave place to a caustic finesse which burnt like red-hot needles. He was at those times almost an artist, since he was exercising his chief gift; the secondary one of moneymaking was far below in intensity.

So they went, Lily running, sobbing, swaying, Eli following with long strides and uplifted voice.

‘When we get whome,’ he said with relish, ‘there’s them six quarts o’ sour milk. Waste not, want not! It mun be done summat with. Afore you go to bed to-night, you mun set it for milk cheese. You mun scald the things, stretch the muslin, lade the milk, press it. Afore that fetch the sticks, coals and water, and boil it to scald with.’

‘There’s no muslin,’ said Lily in the midst of sobs, relief in her voice. She was tired out with excitement, and she knew that the work would take hours to do.

‘Your good old father’s thought of that,’ said Eli. ‘A father knoweth his own child. There’s muslin on your back; when we get in you’ll rip it and make the cheeses in that.’

‘I won’t. So there!’ said Lily, for the blouse was her new, radiant, much-laboured-on treasure.

‘Woe unto the disobedient children!’ Eli intoned. ‘I am even as the other Eli. Yea! For I have not corrected you, and the Lord is angry with His servant for these things. You’ll take it off now!’ He tore at a sleeve.

Lily shrieked, striving to elude him.

‘Folk ’ll see me! Folk ’ll see me!’ she screamed. ‘I’ll be disgraced.’

‘You dunna mind having only a bit of muslin atwixt you and disgrace, so you met as well be without.’

Lily’s blouse was in ribbons. Her not very clean calico chemise, fastened with a large safety-pin, and her thin, bare arms were revealed. Part of her hair had fallen loose. They stood beneath a witan-tree on Bitterley Hill; for Lily’s running had brought them nearly home. This little ash

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was the only one that had weathered the northern storms; it was stunted and berryless from excess of cold — like Lily's mind.

‘Say you repent!’ said Eli, his eyes glittering with a frenzy of half-satisfied passion. Lily leant against the frail tree in utter abandonment.

‘I repent,’ she said with weak bitterness.

‘No. That wunna do. Kneel down and say a prayer.’

Lily did so, repeating a sort of gabbled litany. If any angel or devil peered from the cavernous air upon the pigmy scene surprise must have been his prevailing emotion — surprise at the infinite ingenuity of man, the ephemeral, in finding new methods of torture for his fellows.

‘And now,’ said Eli, ‘you’ve *said* a deal about repenting, now come on whome and let’s see what you’ll *do*.’

Bitterley Farm was a large, whitewashed huddle of buildings, with patches of damp on the walls. There were no curtains and the upper windows were broken. There was no garden except a potato patch and a few gooseberry bushes. A spring soaked out close to the door and the cattle had trodden it into a slough. The only beauty about the farm was a huge willow, now fleecy with white seed. Its long, slim leaf-shadows wandered up and down the ugly walls untiringly, like the hands of a hypnotist tracing occult signs unknown to the human intellect — but guessed at by intuition. Even when its golden leaves lay like discarded raiment at its feet and the sky was obliterated with flying clouds it wove thin patterns in the sparse sunshine. It crooned for six months and cried aloud for six, saying always one thing. Perhaps the cuckoo on its top bough knew what it said, and even the hens scratching among its roots. Lily had a vague sense that it meant something, wrote some message on the bleak walls. But Eli knew nothing of it. On moonlit nights it sent a shadow to finger his harsh old face in the cheerless room: but the dream that might have come, tarried, and when he muttered in his sleep it was of vengeance, punishment and such grey negations — never of the beauty that is God. To-night the calves clustered round the door, eager for their evening meal. Inside, Lily nearly fell over the two pails of milk — she was so blinded by tears.

‘Bide where you be till I come back,’ said Eli. Lily sat down on the floor between the pails, weary and sullen. Eli went out to the barn and fetched the sheep-shears.

‘Now, take that bonnet off!’ he ordered, returning. Lily did so without comment, half dozing. Eli seized the long golden coils, all in a mass on Lily’s shoulders, and before she knew what was happening they lay on the floor by her hat.

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'There!' said Eli. 'That's a temptation gone. Now do the cheeses.' He turned on his heel, rather uneasy at the blaze of hatred in her leaden face. He went into the parlour and read the Bible as usual on Sunday nights. He was shaking like a drunkard, and sweating. He read three chapters instead of one, to lull his uneasiness; then he knelt and explained all about it to his God — from his own point of view. Then he fell asleep with his head on the Bible, and was awakened by the sound of his rook-rifle to see Lily — perfectly white, like a corpse -- re-loading.

'So you'll shoot me, 'oot, Lilian?' he said calmly.

She made no reply, intent on her work. He sat and watched quizzically. He was not afraid of death. Neither did it occur to him to question it. It was ordained. His God had said it. So be it. He had often shot a dog or not implicitly obeying him. Well, now his master was killing him. He faced Lily calmly. For the first time in his life he felt proud of her. To think of her doing such a thing — that chit of a girl! So they gazed at each other, a kind of madness on both of them. One of the dogs howled and Eli reached for it with his foot under the table and kicked it. The room was very still, like a broken machine. Above the mantelpiece hung, rather crookedly, a painted text — 'Fear God.' The horsehair chairs stood inhospitably against the wall. A thick file of accounts hung on a skewer beside a shelf containing *The Auctioneer*, *Old Moore* and the *Imprecatory Psalms*. On the floor, not yet swept up, were the snippings of Lily's green blouse. She was ready. She straightened herself and lifted the rifle to her shoulder. They gazed at each other stonily.





CHAPTER 6

SUDDENLY there was a clatter of hoofs, a voice shouting 'Yo-ho!' to the calves round the door, and Joe — crimson, breathless, cheery from his mad ride — knocked the mud from his boots and walked into the passage.

'He'll see your chemise,' said Eli indifferently, when he heard Joe first; Lily's eyes flickered. Sex, a surface thing with her, but the strongest influence she knew, awoke again and overcame her madness. She fled through the door into the box-staircase, taking the rifle with her. Eli sat unmoved as he had been throughout. Joe had meanwhile fallen over the milk-pails and was in a sad plight for a knight-errant. He opened the parlour door and came in accompanied by a stream of milk.

'Where's Lil?' he asked.

'You're in my debt for all that good milk,' said Eli. 'Even unto the skirts of his raiment,' he added, with sour amusement.

'Where's Lil?' Joe repeated.

'Tittivating most likely.'

'There's no light upstairs,' said Joe.

Eli was surprised at his acuteness.

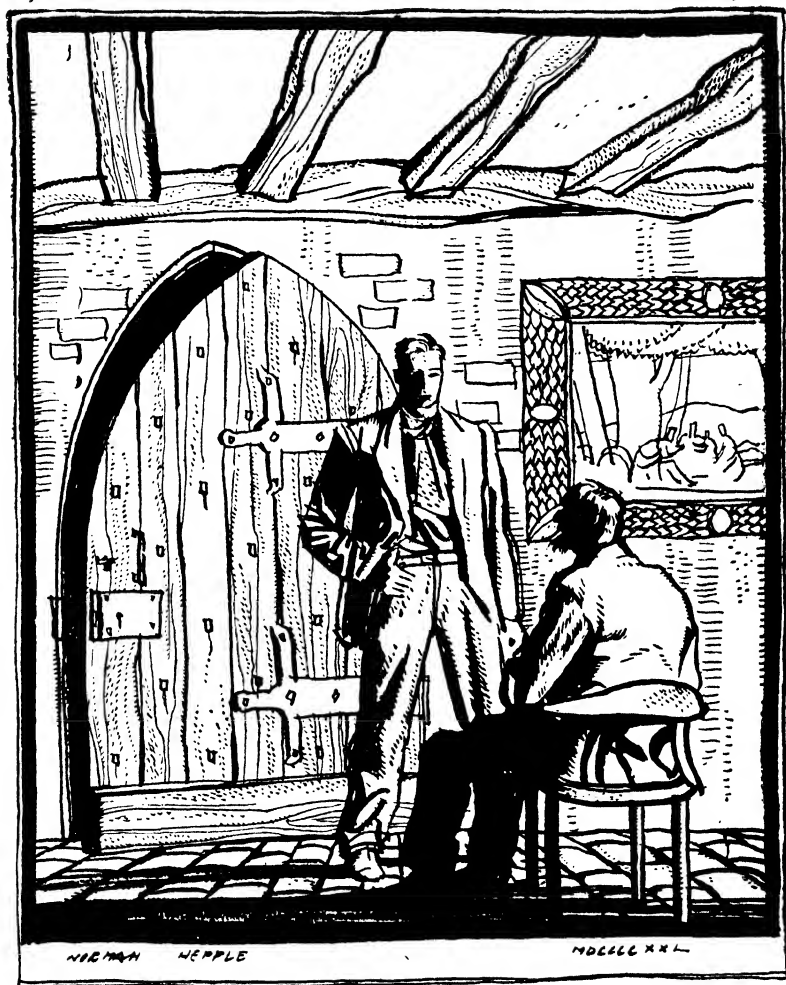
'Maybe she's gone to bed,' he amended.

'Well, I want to see her.'

'What for?'

'Mr. Huntbatch! You're her dad, and so I try to be jutiful,' said Joe, with some dignity; 'but when I come to tell her something — I tells her. I don't mouth it to other folk first.'

'What d'you want, then? Me to call her?' Eli began to feel that Providence was not looking after him in its usual efficient way.



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'Aye,' said Joe; 'now.'

Eli called up the stairs. There was no reply.

'Lil!' called Joe, and in his rough voice dwelt an amazing tenderness.

There was a movement above, and Lily's voice, striving to be as usual, replied, 'Coming.'

In a few minutes she came — tear-stained and limp, without the rifle and in her working dress. At sight of her face Joe opened his mouth to exclaim 'Laws me!' but closed it again sharply, having suddenly grown from a hobbledehoy to manhood. He stood looking from Lily to Eli with bent brows.

Then he turned to Eli and told the only successful lie of his life with the utmost frankness.

'They want to know,' he said, nodding in the direction of High Leasowes, 'if you can spare Lil to go hilling to-morrow. Mother's agreed with the higgler for a big lot and we'm short-handed. I was to take Lil back to-night if so be she'll come.'

'Oh! you was, was you?' Eli was at a loss for once. He perfectly saw through Joe, and at last began to respect him as almost an equal — though grudgingly. 'Well, o' course, if your mother wants her — when the ladies ask —' he began.

'Lil! Put your hat on and come along of me,' said Joe. 'Your father says so. You mun obey him.' Slow satire pointed the words.

They went out.

'Jump up behind me,' said Joe. 'And, Eli!' he called back, 'there's a bit of plaster gone from the wall just above your chair. I'd see to it if I was you.'

Lily clung to him like a frightened kitten.

'Quiet, now, little lass!' he said. 'I heerd the shot. Which of you was it?'

'Me,' said Lily faintly, and they were silent.

So they came over Bitterley, trotting down the moonlit track through dark cloud-shadows to the Ardens' door. They passed the Batch Stone, a boundary mark intended to be imperishable, but worn down by the rubbing of the cattle against it until the chiselled words were obliterated. So the 'thou shalt nots' of man are erased; only the great affirmatives stand unscarred, and it seems hardly worth while to spend time on negations.

Whitefoot made no sound on the turf. The grouse slept in the deep, arched glooms of the heather forest. From the spinney on the left, just before they came out of Hilltop Road into the western part of the Arden sheepwalk, there smote across them a tide of larch resin and a frothy scent

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from the elder-trees that stood witchlike round the wood. Out in the Far Leasowes — two large enclosures — there was a new tide of fragrance. It came from the young bracken, wild thyme, burnt grass, heather and cloudberry bushes. With them was the austere fragrance drawn from the rock all day by the sun, and now hanelled delicately by moonlight and dew. The cattle crowded up, snuffing, very much at ease — like all animals and primitive people when nothing intervenes between them and immensity. To the west immeasurably lofty in the flat moonlight which washed all unevenness from the ridges, stood the Devil's Chair — silver and ebony. From very far off, like the complaint of a denizen of some other world, came the cry of a sheep somewhere in the complex cwms or flats beyond the Little Wood.

As they neared the cottage a stout lamb with a very tightly curled and close-fitting coat caracoled up with heavy mirth and a long-drawn deep bass 'baa!' It looked so absurd, with its middle-aged figure, bulging forehead and awkward babyishness, that Joe burst into a guffaw. He never, as a rule, saw either humour or pathos in the things that were his daily life. They were just 'ship', 'them steers', 'old Whitefoot'. But to-night he was strung to his highest pitch. His nerves were at last existent; he had attained in minute measure the sad distinction of the poet — who enjoys because he suffers. The lamb grunted and made off at Joe's 'Haw-haw!'

Lily awoke from a half-doze, irritated.

'Whatever be you laughing at, you great gom —' she began. No, she must not call Joe a gomeril. This was a different Joe. She was frightened of him. Also a faint and very unusual sense of gratitude dwelt in her.

The great keen air, like an eagle, not coming in several breezes, but in one soundless and indivisible force, smote on Lily's shorn head.

'Oh, Joe!' she whispered. 'I canna be seen! My hair —'

Joe pulled his red handkerchief from his pocket and tied it under her chin.

'Theer! There's not a tidier wench in England,' he said, with an admiration that was balm to her. She closed her eyes. Tears crept slowly down her cheeks.

Inside the house Mrs. Arden awoke.

'Somebody laughed out in the pasture, John,' she said; 'maybe it's the Dark Riders! Put up a prayer.'

'Now, Mother! you're too given up to them wold, unrighteous tales.'

'But there is some one. Harkye! They're taboring on the door. Maybe it's a call for me.' She was up and at the window in a moment, flinging on a skirt and shawl.

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'Mother!' said Joe's voice, strained yet authoritative; 'come down, 'oot.'

'What's come o'er the lad?'

'Best go down, Mother,' said John, beginning to dress; 'and a quiet tongue is the healer.'

Mrs. Arden went down.

'Here's Lil, Mother; can she sleep along of our Deb?' asked Joe.

Lily stood at the door, white, with the scarlet handkerchief bound round her small head, her dress only half fastened in her haste. She blinked at the candle in a helpless way, like a young barn-owl.

Mrs. Arden looked over her spectacles first at Lily with solicitude, then at Joe with severe morality, tempered by primitive charity.

'Joe, lad,' she asked, 'is it —? Have you —?'

'No. It inna, and I hanna,' snapped Joe crossly. 'You're allus harping on one string, Mother.'

'Well, Joe,' said Mrs. Arden apologetically, 'if a shepherd dunna mind his own sheepwalk, there's none'll mind it for him. But come you in, Lily, my dear.'

She raked the fire and threw dry wood on, then hung the kettle over the blaze. The place was full of resinous fragrance and warm light. Joe surveyed the scene, standing just outside the door with his head bent to look in, his broad shoulders touching the jambs. He felt rather like he did on Fair days, when the long tramp behind the sheep was over, and they given up to their new owner, so that he could go, untrammelled and lonely, about the fair. The pride of responsibility, the stress of a necessary and difficult job were gone. He was just Joe Arden again. He took White-foot round to the stable.

'Well, Joe,' said his father, matter-of-factly, 'what about a bit of supper?'

'I dunno as I want any, Father.'

Deb appeared on the stairs with the little lamp that always burned by her room at night — lit by her father.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'Nought,' said Joe. 'Mother'll tell you,' he added, with sublime faith.

Soon there was a comfortable scent of tea. Rover had never known such doings out of lambing time. He was not pleased. The light from the 15. 11½d. 'alabaster' lamp fell gently on poor Lily, sipping thankfully from the best china. Joe, embarrassed but not apologetic, consumed bread and cheese with the enormous appetite of those that come from spiritual heights. John talked of common things in reassuring tones — not understanding the circumstances, but seeing deeper, into the infinities. Deb, her straight hair falling in sweet disarray over her old shawl, sat protectingly

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by Lily, and Mrs. Arden, chatty, intent as a field-marshal deploying before battle, poured tea and buttered bread with the thrill of unusual excitement with which she met her many sleepless nights — a thrill which quite made up for her quiet life and her lost rest.

'There, Lil,' she said, 'don't you waver. Deb, you take her up now, and to-morrow we'll go hillin' and I'll tell us all about it.'

Her crushed curiosity spoke the 'all' with relish.

Lil looked at Deb's long hair, remembered how she had once despised it, and burst into a storm of sobs.

Joe looked round accusingly.

'Nay, nay,' said John, 'don't take on, little 'un, we'm all friends her.'

'Well, Mr. Arden,' said Lil, gasping, 'and Joe and Mrs. Arden' — (she left Deb out — her hair was so long, so heart-breakingly intact) — 'I'm sure I'm very much obliged and — and I'll never forget it. No, I won't that.'

Joe gazed at her over his large cup, with love, the white everlasting that grows in simple places, flowering in his face. He did not know that to such as Lily the snapping of flowers — even everlastings — was a matter of course. They were things to pick, use, fling away: only blossoms, not necessary to any one, like vegetables and meat. So the gospel of the grey-hearted had sunk into Lily's soul, which was meant to be a thing of colour and fragrance, but had been so frozen and stunted that only a poor little empty crevasse remained.



CHAPTER 7

As the grandfather clock struck five with a chary expenditure of energy, wheezing before each stroke, Mrs. Arden opened the upper flap of the door, 'shoo'd' the fowls, and looked to see whether it was the man or the woman who stood outside the ornate cardboard 'weather-house'.

'A caselty day, Father!' she called up; 'the 'ooman's out.'

Soon they had breakfast and set out with baskets and large sun-bonnets. John had gone with Joe to help in the hay, for it was carrying day and the winrows must all be spread to dry after the storm, then raked afresh.

John's own hay was not yet cut. The little crofts, perched so high in the cold air and the clouds, ripened late.

Sometimes it was September before the hay was safely carried; for it had to be done between storms, and storms were many. John cut it with a scythe. Spare and tall in the clear purple morning he would go up and down with vigorous, rhythmic movements, gravely followed by Rover; and a shadow-man, a shadow-dog went after them, dark and vast on the green field. Then Mrs. Arden and Deborah came and tossed the grass with a merry talking.

On the day when it was ready to be 'lugged' Joe came home early. A twill sheet on two poles, reminiscent of ambulance stretchers, was piled with hay, and carried by Joe and John as carefully as if it were really an invalid.

But if rain-clouds blew up — as they generally did — the dignified march changed to a mad rush; Rover, protestingly exchanging his stroll for a trot, was half-buried in falling hay; and, as Mrs. Arden said, it was 'one pikel-full for the rick and ten for the mixen, and such a mingicumumbus

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as never was.' They all regarded 'lugging the hay' as a game of hazard played against the forces of nature, and they played with spirit.

Deborah carried dinner in a basket, and Mrs. Arden brandished the inevitable kettle; for the best picking-ground was a mile away, and they would spend their noon-spell by the Little Wood.

'Real picker's weather it is,' said Mrs. Arden. 'Now we've got a state of the rest, let's see if we can get a tuthree quarts afore we have our vittels.'

She bobbed along rosily and somewhat breathlessly, because she talked incessantly, between the two enigmas who vouchsafed few remarks. Her intuition had partially unravelled both enigmas, and she made the mistake of most people with intuition — she pulled so hard at her thread that she broke it.

'Well, Deb!' she said, after some talk of yesterday's chapel-going; 'I wonder when Mr. Right's coming along for you, and I wonder what he'll be like — light-haired for sure, folks allus like their opposites.'

Deborah had decided during the night that she would be an old maid. To blush as she had done in chapel was, she thought, 'ondecent'. If she blushed like that during a hand-shake, what would it be in courting? Also with Lily tossing beside her in the narrow bed — her cropped yellow head overwhelmingly reminiscent of another — Deborah was sure she 'couldn't abear' marriage.

'Dear to goodness!' she said to herself; 'how girls can go in for it all beats me, so it does.'

She looked down at Mrs. Arden with some dignity and some confusion.

'I'll bide along of you and Father and Joe,' she said loftily; 'I dunna like the men.'

'Hoity-toity! But Joe'll not bide with us long. No danger!' Mrs. Arden turned her artillery on to Lily with somewhat obvious mechanism.

'He'll be wanting them fowls' feathers I've saved — plenty of them there are, too, enough to make a nice fat double feather-bed.'

Both girls looked haughtily into the distance.

'P'raps he'll marry Lucy Thruckton,' Lily said patronizingly; 'she'd suit him right well, both being rather full in habit.'

'Lily Huntbatch!' Mrs. Arden spoke with asperity, dropping her tact for frank curiosity. 'You'm keeping a very still tongue in your head about your doings last night — a very still tongue, you be!' She waited, but Lily said nothing.

'And it looks queer for a girl to come riding along of our Joe in the black of night with a good whome and a middling good father yonder, and me thinking it was the Dark Riders.'

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Silence. Mrs. Arden's charitable feelings had worn a little thin, as such feelings will when the recipient seems not only ungrateful, but unconscious of them. If Lily had thrown herself on Mrs. Arden's mercy last night, and told her that she and Joe had 'gone too far', Mrs. Arden would have loved her — fought the world for her. But this cold righteousness was irritating.

'It's no good mumchancing like that, Lily!' she continued. 'You may as well out with it soon as late. As for Joe — he'll look higher than Lucy Throckton, I'se warrant; and maybe higher than some others that'd make pretty bad wives for all their yellow hair — leaving six quarts of milk to go sour!'

At this point Lily's bonnet blew off and she stood revealed.

Mrs. Arden gasped. Lily began to cry. Deborah — who had loyally promised not to breathe a word of it — whispered:

'How could it have come about?'

'There, there!' crooned the kind old weather-vane, 'dunna take on! It'll soon grow. But however did you come to do it?'

Lily waived.

'It won't grow for years and years! I've got to choose between being married looking like a ninepin in a veil, or waiting till I'm even older than Deb.' The taunt was lost on Deborah, because of her last night's resolve; but Mrs. Arden crimsoned with anger.

'You ungrateful chit!' she cried roundly. 'Five and twenty's young enough for anybody — dear me, it is. A woman's bones aren't set proper afore that. It's mean little brats of chillun yours 'll be if you wed this side of twenty-five! But you canna,' she added, with a smack of the lips. 'Your hair won't be growed. As you said, you'll look like a ninepin.'

The humour of this suddenly struck her. She doubled into helpless laughter, slapping herself unmercifully as she always did.

'Mother, poor Lil's very miserable; I think you met give her a bit of comfort.'

Deborah was mildly reproving; she felt sorry for Lily. From her aloof height — she was at present icily self-fortified against sex — Lily's obvious sex-enchainment was a most pitiful thing. On account of it she forgave all Lily's little poisoned darts with large tolerance.

'Well, I'm sorry if I was nasty,' said Mrs. Arden huffily. 'But to say such things to Deb — and she Joe's sister! And to be so high and mighty with Joe, and never to give me a word in answer! And you don't know your luck in getting Joe — a good lad as ever stepped. All I can say is, as when your time comes, Lily (as come it will, ninepin or not), and you're

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crying and sobbing (as you will, for you cry for nought), you'll be glad enough of me then, and of Joe too.'

'I shan't. I shall hate Joe.' Lily was furious. 'But it won't never be,' she added hastily.

'Well, time 'll show,' said Mrs. Arden placably, feeling that she had time, nature and Joe on her side. 'And now if we're going to get them old berries, we'd best get 'em.'

They had reached the highest level. The budding heather was round them like a dull crimson sea, encroached upon by patches of vivid winterberries flecked with leaves of ladybird red. In the lustrous air all colours were intensified, and far things came close.

The Devil's Chair loomed over them — for all the distance between — like a fist flourished in the face. It was dark as purple nightshade. The cobalt shadows of clouds swept across the hills in stealthy majesty. From here there was no view of plain or valley, the plateau stretched so far on every side that it shut out everything but the distant hills. A whimbrel cried overhead, shaking its sweet, long-drawn whistle into silver drops, like quicksilver thrown on marble. The ponies drownsed in the swamps. Nothing stirred. They picked for two hours, absorbed and perspiring. Then Mrs. Arden, who had been covertly watching Lily as she ate handful after handful, remarked with caustic humour —

'You won't take many berries back for Joe's pie if you pick all the while into Eve's basket!'

The two young women were shocked. Like most country girls they were prudish, somewhat in the manner of mediæval nuns, with a very clear knowledge of life as it is and a sense that only isolation and extreme care can save them from the *mêlée*. Mrs. Arden's frequent allusions to her 'stummick' always made Deborah blush. And once at a cattle fair, when her mother had knowingly punched a cow in the ribs and announced with *bonhomie* to the owner: 'She won't be long!' Deborah had been overwhelmed with shame.

'Well, it must have gone twelve, I want my dinner,' said Mrs. Arden. So they lit the fire and filled the kettle from a wood-spring where rare ferns touched it daintily with supple fingers. They sat down in the short shadow.

'There's Mrs. Hotchkiss coming from Mellicot,' said Mrs. Arden suddenly. 'Laws! Those boys do grow. And there's Mrs. Palfrey. Fancy bringing that mite, Willie! It seems only a day since I was going to and agen with him, and him nigh dead of croup. And there's Lucy Thruckton, coming like a sleepy bumblebee from Wood's End way,' she

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announced after a period of munching. She sprang up alertly. 'Well! thank God for my good dinner, and I'm not going to let that fat Lucy get all the berries,' she said, 'so I'm off again.'

The two girls stayed in the shade, chatting in a desultory way. The pickers wandered to and fro, lost in distance, appearing out of hollows, passing round the white signpost like dancers in some strange ritual. They stooped for the small, purple fruit, wrapped in purple shadow themselves. Little box-carts, trundled by urchins, began to fill with berries, heaped in miniature replica of the hills. Shadows began to climb from the cwms, and clouds came faster. The signpost — so lonely in its ring of worn turf — looked, with its outspread arms against the dim reaches of heather, like a crucifix under the troubled sky. It stood with forlorn gallantry between the coming storm and its prey. It would be lashed by rain all night; lightning would play round it. The pickers, as with some mysterious sense of kinship, circled about it — so disconsolately consoling it seemed, so like their own destinies. Deborah, looking at it, thought of what her father had said about 'forkit lightning!' She wondered if she would ever be lonesome as it was, set up for a sign, a mark for the storm, pointing vaguely, — whither?





CHAPTER 8

SUDDENLY Mrs. Arden straightened herself, standing at gaze. A stranger was coming over the hill. He stopped by the signpost, seemed to make nothing of it, and came on towards her.

'Can you tell me the way to Lostwithyn?' he asked.

'Be you him as preached yesterday?' parried Mrs. Arden.

'Yes.'

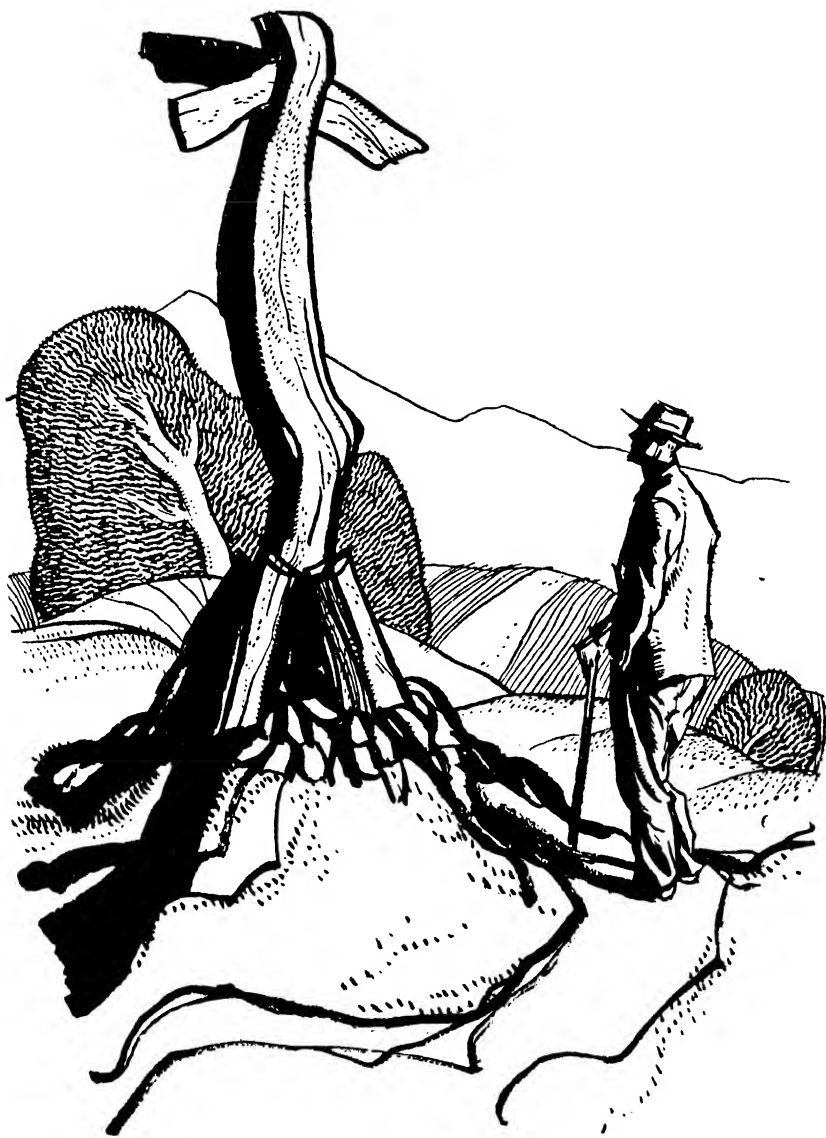
She was taking him in. 'A comeiy chap,' she said mentally. He stood looking down at her amusedly, conscious of his good looks. Even his 'up to date' blue suit did not spoil his supple muscularity, though it was cut absurdly. He was smoking a briar pipe of enormous proportions.

'Quite our Joe's sort!' commented Mrs. Arden.

'Joe's sort' was, of course, young manliness personified, just as 'Deb's sort' was perfect maidenhood, and 'John's sort' something that brought tears to her eyes when she sat and thought her own thoughts in chapel.

'The signpost doesn't say much,' he added.

'Oh, that!' she commented with much scorn. 'Nobody takes no notice of that. You canna go by signposses here, you mun go the way the hills'll let you. But them posses,' she added, 'they do for the counting councils to be busy about, painting the names and that. Else who knows what they'd be doing? — for a more mischievous set of men there never was! Besides, poor things, they want to seem to be doing something for their money like other folks.'



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He laughed.

The two girls by the wood jumped, looked and sat mute, expectant.

'And the way —?' he reminded her.

She had made a resolve.

'Now, it being so hot,' she said persuasively, 'what'd you say to a cup of tea?'

'Well, I'm sure I'm much obliged, but —'

'Come you on,' said she, with authority. 'Come you on and set you down.'

'Well, to goodness!' breathed Deborah. 'Mother's bringing him here.'

Lily skilfully made the most of her front hair under the bonnet. She would see if she couldn't cut Deb out, although her curls were gone.

'Gawls!' shrieked Mrs. Arden, while yet a long way off; 'here's some one as you both knows.'

For the second time Deborah's eyes met those of the stranger.

'Lily,' said Mrs. Arden, 'run and get some sticks while I fetch the water there's a good girl.'

She hustled Lily into the wood.

'And so I've got my second chance,' said Stephen Southernwood.

Deborah was silent.

'I never saw a soul except you in chapel,' he continued.

Deborah twisted her apron into a rope.

'My name's Stephen; might I ask yours?'

He had more ease of manner than anyone she knew, although he had not attained the absence of self-consciousness which the Lord of the Manor down at Slepe had gained (not without tears) at Eton, and which Joe had always possessed as a birthright. At present he was going through a strange experience; he was meeting his primitive self for the first time. It was a very shadowy self so far: but it was something quite different from 'the nice young man' had who caused such a stir among the ladylike drapery assistants in Silvertown.

What had caused the change he did not know; was it the hills, the storm, the clear, still face beneath the darkened chapel window? Since yesterday Deborah's face — vital, yet unawakened — had come before him in flashes, vivid and transient. This transience had stirred desire in him; he was ever for the fleeting rainbows of life, and what was denied he must possess. Her evident capacity for large life fascinated him, and the veil of sleep that was upon her fired him to a wakening onslaught like the sun's upon a dim country. Life ceased to appear as a neat, correctly docketed arrangement of a little football, a little Huxley (to improve the mind), a

little Sherlock Holmes (relaxation), a little religion (respectability). How it did appear he would have been ashamed to say. The drapery assistants had made him feel smoothly romantic. They themselves were smooth in manner, and they saw to it that in their presence life had no rough edges. The utmost propriety, the utmost glossing of facts was necessary in order to pass muster with them. They were cool, collected, conventional. He suddenly hated them and their smoothness. They had smoothed him also as a rolling-pin smooths dough. They had deferred this curious, electric, mad meeting with himself. He had sampled the pleasure of a kiss fairly often; but his world had been far removed from the forcible kisses of desire, the indecent snatching of the starving for bread, the hot struggle for existence. He had been detached and impersonal about the great facts of life; now they were hot and clamorous in his ears. He looked swiftly at Deborah, and immediately all that he had ever read about the embraces of lovers came into his mind as a poignant, personal matter. She turned her head away, for the look in his eyes was like a strong clasp of her. His thoughts galloped. He dragged at the reins, intuitively feeling such thoughts to be indecent in Deborah's presence: but they were not to be stopped. They rushed on through the whole of human experience; it lay open to him as the countryside below did — vast, delicate, savage. Kissing ceased to be a game. It was a key to intenser life. The act of speech was no longer merely for courtesies, expressions of opinion, pleasantries. It was for demanding joy from the world, surrender from women. The hearth-fire, little houses, night, took upon them the magic that they wear for lovers. For the first time in his life he realized Death — the murderer of ecstasy. Rapture, relentlessness, force — these ceased to be words. They were manhood; they were himself. Tears, tenderness, pain — these were woman; these the woman who loved him would be and suffer in the glory of surrender, in the birth-pang. All these things — dim and half understood — flashed through his protesting mind, while Deborah sat, constrained and afraid to look round, gazing into the melting distance. A voice far down in Stephen's being answered the whimble that called above. It summoned Deborah peremptorily; it shouted defiance at the hills, the world beyond, the intangible and therefore terrible depths of blue air. Out of the muddle of half-understood ideas, small wishes and conventions that had concealed Stephen Southernwood from himself sprang a creature direct and impulsive as the old gods — who took their way unknown and unhindered, claiming with a nod the love and tears of the witless daughters of men, themselves recking nothing of a love that is pain, only knowing a swift desire, shattering to the desired. So he

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entered into half his heritage — the physical glory of man. The other half was so far undreamed of.

‘Why do you look away all the time?’ he asked.

She turned her head with an effort.

‘Where d’you live?’ was the next question, direct to rudeness. Yet she felt a delicious homage in it.

She nodded sideways.

‘Upper Leasurs.’

‘Can I come to Upper Leasurs?’

‘Aye — no.’

He laughed.

‘You funny little girl!’

She had never been called little. She was indignant for a moment. Then she found it sweet. She felt happy and humble-minded as she did when they sang in chapel of sin and forgiveness.

‘I tell you what,’ said Stephen, ‘I shall come to Upper Leasurs and the rest of ’em whether you say I can or not.’

Deborah’s apron was a long, creased rag.

‘You’ve not told me your name yet!’

‘Deborah.’

‘Shall we go for a stroll in all that green and red stuff, Deborah? What’s it called?’

‘Wimberry wires.’

‘When they call us we won’t go.’

‘Mother ’ll holla till we do,’ said Deborah, matter-of-factly. But she went with him. For the first time in her life the heather was only a carpet, the sky only a roof. She walked between them in a shaken world, to a sound of shaken music. The whimbrel’s cry fell there like broken glass; and in her soul the crystal of her pride shivered into fragments.

Lily, who had been listening behind a stunted may-tree, stamped with rage, and was what Mrs. Arden called ‘almighty imperent!’

‘Why should I call them, Lily Huntbatch?’

‘It looks bad.’

‘Not as bad as you looked, in the dark of night, along of our Joe, with your dress only half done up.’

Lily was silent, but she thought ecstatically how she would try and capture Stephen, throw Joe over and be quits with Mrs. Arden.

‘Here they be, friendly as calves o’er a gate,’ said Mrs. Arden, forgetting her annoyance.

‘He’s a deal taller than Joe,’ said Lily; ‘head and shoulders.’

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'That he's not! Joe'd be above his ear. I've notched him and Deb year by year on the door, and I know.'

Lily watched Stephen.

'The chief among ten thousand!' she murmured, with the cheap emotion of her kind — often mistaken for love, altruism, religious fervour.

'You're the chief of all gomerils, Lily!' said Mrs. Arden. Then she surveyed Deborah.

'Took for matrimony,' was her comment.

'I think it's very vulgar,' Lily remarked, 'to talk about marrying and kids all the time like some do. I can't see why a chap can't talk to a girl without such things being thought of.'

'No more do I. Only they dunna, you least of all. And as for vulgar, if such things be vulgar, then you and me and the greatest in the land, aye! even the ministers of God's vulgar — for they're all the signs that such things came to pass. And come to that,' she added, rising to metaphysical heights; 'come to that you'd call the Lord Himself vulgar, you wicked girl! For didn't He plan it all out from the first kiss to the last christening? Answer me that, Lil Huntbatch!'

She gathered breath as Deborah and Stephen came up.

'This is Lily Huntbatch, that's walking out with our Joe,' she announced.

The look Lily gave her was venomous.

'Do you like walking out, Miss Huntbatch?'

'Depends who with.' Her bewildering smile was lost; he was looking at Deborah.

'Your safety-pin's undone, Deb,' she snapped, 'and your belt's crooked.'

'Here's Lucy — after some tea, I suppose,' said Mrs. Arden. 'She's terrible earnest for victuals, Mr. Southernwood, and she does credit to 'em.'

Lucy bore down on them.

'Well, you *are* hot,' said Lily, welcoming a victim for her anger.

'I be that.'

'And red in the face.'

'I allus am.'

'Your hat's all collywessen.'

'It do get like that.'

'And your brooch is coming off.'

'If I loses 'im, I loses 'im,' said Lucy calmly.

Lily gave it up. If Lucy was too inert to mind about her brooch, given her by her only admirer at the age of twelve, with 'Mizpah' on its moon-like surface, she was invulnerable.

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'There, Lucy, my dear, you shall have a nice cup of tea.' Mrs. Arden spoke protectingly.

'Thank you kindly,' Lucy replied, rapaciously and gratefully. 'I'm sure I'm ready for bucketsfull; the sweat's poured off me till I feel right thin.'

At this remark Stephen was seized with uncontrollable laughter.

'And he stuffed his handkerchief into his mouth,' Mrs. Arden recounted to John afterwards, 'and he rocks to and agen like me with the colic. I never seed anyone laugh like what he did. Eh! I like good laughers. I'll they may do, but they're not bad-hearted — not if they laugh till it hurts 'em. And then Deb started to laugh, and I couldna help but join, and I'll — as had been sitting all the while like an owl with the face-ache — began to say "hee-hee!" very mincing-like, and poor Lucy (never knowing what it was all about) opened her mouth and bellowed, and the old whimbre set up a din of laughing round about. You never heard such a noise in your life, Father! and then all of a sudden the thunder came on and we were all in a pretty taking. And Stephen (he says I'm to call him by his given-name) remembered as he ought to have been at Lostwithyn how's ago. He'd stayed the night at Wood's End along of the storm. And he ran one way and we the other, and poor Lucy went lolloping whome, frittened to death. Deborah went awful quiet when it came on to thunder; and she says "Good evening" very stiff to Stephen, as if she'd minded something agen him; and when we were coming back she says, "Mother, there's summat foreboded."'

'Aye, she said that yesterday.'

'Well, better go the way of 'ooman, whatsoever's foreboded,' said Mrs. Arden. 'Why, goodness! There's Eli trapesing through all this rain. He's come for Lil, sure to be.'



CHAPTER 9

ELI had passed a very irksome and busy day; for he managed to get a great deal of work out of Lil, feckless as she was. He had been obliged to strain the milk, light the fire and get his own breakfast. He had forgotten to feed the young turkeys, and three of them had passionately and poetically died — to spite him, as he said. The cow Lily always milked had kicked him, objecting to his hard hands. He had cut himself while peeling potatoes. Altogether he emerged from his single-handed contest with inanimate matter and what he called 'brute beasteses' somewhat battered. Also he had been again troubled with a curious sense of admiration for Lily, realizing that if she had spirit enough to behave as she did last night, she could do most things that she chose.

'She could make a darned sight better butter nor what she does,' he grumbled, 'if she could shoot her feyther.'

He had felt rather startled on coming down in the morning to see the long golden locks on the floor.

'I've bin a fool,' he said. 'When'll she cotch a husband now as she's nothing to take the eye?'

Altogether it appeared to him that it would be a forgiving and dignified thing to go and fetch her back again.

'The prodigal daughter!' he thought, with a wry smile. 'Well, she wunna get much but husks at John's. Poor as a winter feldefar! No yead for business. Keeps that great strapping girl of his eating her head off at whome and doing nought. Work 'em and marry 'em, I says. Keep 'em hard at it and they unna kick.'

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He suddenly remembered that Lily *had* kicked, and was displeased.

'Gerrup!' he shouted at old Speedwell, his brown pony, now sprinkled with white. She moved away slowly, and he threw a stone after her.

'Worth twenty women, that hoss is,' he murmured — apparently to the Almighty, to whom he spoke frequently and familiarly.

'Never say die, her won't.'

He threw another stone. He could not throw at the Almighty or Lily and he had a need to throw. Yet he was fond of Speedwell in his knotty and sapless way.

He put on his old round felt hat, very high and pointed in the crown and broad in the brim, and set out. He felt that he was under an obligation to Mrs. Arden for Lily's board and lodging for the night. This hurt his pride. 'And me with all that money!' he said. A present was the thing but what present? He did not intend to give anything for which he had, or might have, any use, nor anything for which he could possibly get any money. It was very awkward: everything he saw was of use, or might be. The gooseberries were over-ripe; but Lily could make a pie — the Ardens should not have them. There were some chickens with the gapes; but he could, no doubt, cure them. No: he would keep the chickens. But he must take something. He looked round the parlour. His eye fell on the MS. volume of imprecatory psalms — copied out by Lily on Sundays during her childhood under Eli's tight-mouthed supervision. Yes, he would take that. He came out, and tumbled over the prostrate bodies of the three dead turkeys. He would take them too.

'May as well be handsome while you're at it,' he said. 'They can make a pie. It won't be no worse than young rook pie, and that great gawk Joe 'ull be glad of summat to fill his belly.'

So he set out with the psalms under his arm and the turkeys bunched in his hand.

'Summat for you, missis!' he said grandly, as Patty came to the door. 'Take 'em! A free gift they be — free as the Lord's pardon. And I want that darter of mine. The prodigal darter, she is; and her loving father's come all the way to fetch her. Say she's to look sharp.'

It was late, and supper was laid. Joe and his father had just come in, and were washing in the back kitchen. Lily was in Deborah's room, reading an old fashion paper. She sprang up when she heard her father's voice, looking wildly round for a way of escape. Mrs. Arden called her. Lily put on Deborah's sun-bonnet — a blue one that suited her; looked in the glass; decided that she was not attractive enough for her object, and turned in the collar and a little of the front of her dress to show her white throat.

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Then she very softly climbed out of the low window, and dropped on the turf.

'Joe!' she whispered through the back door, when John had gone to speak to Eli.

'Aye?'

'Don't let him take me, Joe — not to-night!'

'Right you are.'

'And, Joe —'

'Aye?'

'Will you come out along the hill a bit when he's gone?'

'I will that!' said Joe.

'When be she coming?' asked Eli from the door. 'Supper? No. I wanna take any victuals off you, poor things!'

Mrs. Arden sniffed.

'Say she's to come this instant minute,' said Eli.

Joe loomed over him.

'A word with you, Eli,' he said.

'Hark at our Joe calling him Eli!' said Mrs. Arden to Deborah. 'Did you ever hear the like? It's always been "Mr. Huntbatch" afore.'

'What is it now?' asked Eli crustily, moving off with Joe.

'She's not coming to-night.'

'Well, of all the impercence! She's got to come.'

'Not to-night.'

'And what good'll she be in the market when she's bided two nights along of you?' snarled Eli.

Joe's hand was heavy on his collar.

'None of that, Eli!' he said.

'Loose me be! And what'll she please to do after to-night?'

'I dunno.'

'Will she come whome to her loving feyther?'

'I shouldna think so.'

'What, then?'

'Mayhappen she'll marry me — if she'll take me.'

'Oho! And what'll you give me to make up for the loss of my dairy-maid?'

'I've nought to give.'

'Oh, yes, you have — you've got bone and muscle, and you can ride. If I give my loving consent to this here 'oly estate, will you give your written word to round up my sheep when I ask you?'

'Maybe that'd be every night,' said Joe drily.

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'Only now and agen,' Eli reassured him; 'and a bit of help at sheep-shearing.'

'Well, I dunna mind that; but nought in writing. And I don't know if she'll take me yet.'

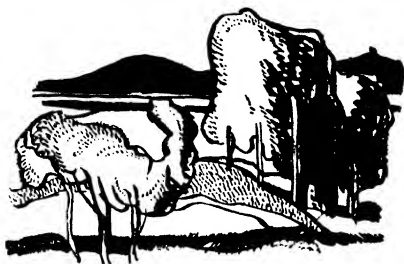
'Ho! Listen what I'm going to tell you. 'She'll drop into yer arms like a blighted apple. Anything to get away from her devoted parent.'

'But all as I do for you is done on ore condition,' said Joe; 'you say nought about last night.'

'Well, I dunno as I want to.'

'On your word of honour?' continued Joe. 'No, that's no good — on your credit as a moneyed man.'

'I swear!' said Eli solemnly.



CHAPTER 10

WHEN he had gone Lily crept out of her hiding-place in the wood-house and met Joe on the hill. She had no idea that he was going to ask her to marry him, and so, by the irony of things, she spent more time and energy luring him on than she had ever spent over anything.

'My Lil! You do look pretty. Why don't you allus turn your dress in?' Lily smiled.

'What was it you was going to say about my arms on Sunday, Joe?'

'As I wanted to touch 'em.'

'Well — you can.'

Joe's hand went gingerly up and down one arm.

'D'you like me, Joe?'

'Like you? Oh, laws!'

'Well, then, would you like to — put your arm round me?'

'Let's sit down, Lil.' Joe was quite overcome. He had always thought 'askin' to wed' was as difficult as catching sparrows in open weather. And now here was Fate playing into his hands. It seemed too good to be true.

'Shall I be on your knee, Joe?' asked Lily confidently.

Joe had the sensation of home-brewed very strongly. He was conscious that he must not have much more of this heady delight.

'You *are* big!' Lily's flattery was obvious, but sufficiently subtle for Joe.

'You're a bit of honey, that's what!' said Joe rapturously.

'Like to kiss me, Joe?'

There was a short silence.

'You don't like kissing, I can see,' Lily commented disappointedly.

'Not like it?' Joe gasped.



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'Well, you kiss as soft as a hen pecking bread.'

'I'll show 'ee if I like it.'

'Oh, dear! You've knocked my bonnet off. My hair!'

'It's all right — all curly like a young lamb, and shining.'

This was sweet to Lily as homage to a king dethroned. She leant back against his shoulder. He kissed her again. They were in the Little Wood. Her eyes sought his bewitchingly as she lay in apparent abandonment to the sweetness of the kiss. She was wondering how many more hints she must give him before he would speak. Joe kissed her throat. Then he put her on the ground roughly.

'We'd best go whome,' he said.

'Why?' She was petulant, not having as yet attained her object.

'I want to do right by you, Lil; and you're so — I canna remember ought when you're like you be to-night.'

'How d'you mean, "right" by me?'

Joe took a deep breath.

'I mean will you wed me, Lil, my dear?'

'Well! Why ever couldn't he say that before?' thought Lily. She smiled.

'I might.'

'Soon?'

'Maybe.'

'Come on whome, Lil. The devil's in this little old wood.'

He walked furiously down the track, Lily half-running, not understanding the fires she had kindled so carefully.

'When?' asked Joe, slackening speed as they neared home.

'I dunno.'

'Next week?'

'Well —'

'Saturday next as ever is?'

'Oh, Joe!'

'Saturday it is, then! And no more Little Wood till then. For you're like home-brewed, Lil.' He gazed at her in puzzled and admiring wonder.

'And you remember as it means no going back to your feyther if you marry me quick. See?'

Lily did see — had seen all along with a clearness that would have startled Joe.

'There's a cottage at Slepe, not let; I'll take it. We only want a few chairs and a table and a mangle to begin with, and a double bed —' He stopped. 'My tongue's hung on in the middle,' he muttered.

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There was a short silence.

'I dunno as it *can* be Saturday, after all,' said Lily at last.

In Deborah's small, whitewashed room with 'God is Love' over the mantelpiece and a bunch of mimulus in the window, the two girls tossed all night.

'What a craking them two keep up, like calves in a strawy calfskit!' Joe thought. An intolerable sweetness came over him as he let his sleepy thoughts wander on to next Saturday.

'There's surely no harm in thinking of it now, it being all settled up,' Joe reasoned; 'besides, I mum get used to it, or I'll never remember all the things I've *got* to remember!'

'Hark at those girls!' said Mrs. Arden to John. 'They're both in love.'

'Or it met be heat lumps,' John suggested.

'Dear sakes, what a man!'

Mrs. Arden would have her romance.

Lily was faced by the necessity of a decision — a thing she hated. There were three ways open to her, and she must traverse one of them, since she could not stay where she was. All were equally detestable to her. She could go home, be a dairymaid, or become the mother of Joe's children. She writhed at the idea of physical endurance. She did not love, and it is love that makes all pain, all privation, a crown of everlastings. The lover knows that the reward is greater than the hardship. To Lily, who had never cared for any creature, it was not so. She had always supposed that some time she would have children: but now that the vague future had come near it was a different matter. So much for Joe, then. But could she go home? No. The dairymaid's situation remained.

'Not if I know it!' she said. 'Work, work, day in, day out.' She came back to Joe. An idea struck her. With a pathetic mingling of naïveté and selfishness she decided that she and Joe could be 'brother and sister'. As she had not divined anything of Joe's nature or his dreams — for intuitions do not come to the self-centred — this resolve was not so heartless as it seemed.

Having come to a satisfactory decision, Lily curled up to sleep like a kitten.

Deborah half awoke.

'He's coming to High Leasurs,' she thought, 'to see me! Me! Not Lily.' She was astonished at his blindness — Lily was so pretty. She was glad with a boundless joy. Already on the horizon of her life flickered the immortal fires, darting strange rays, changing the world.

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'Stephen . . . Stephen Southernwood!' A dart of pride ran through her as she remembered that Lily had not lured his eyes from her once.

'Stephen!' she said aloud, half asleep.

'Keep your silly names to yourself, can't you?' grumbled Lily. But Deborah was asleep.

'Stephen,' she murmured again.

'Oh!' cried Lily, much irritated. 'Joe! Joe! Joe! then, if it's got to be said!' She cried from sheer vexation.



CHAPTER II

'YOUR Joe's gone off his chump, seemin'ly!' said Mr. Shakeshaft to John. 'Down at that cottage, day in, day out — missing good wages all for a wench. How bin the mighty fallen!'

'They've kept company a goodish while,' said John, primed by Patty, who did not want it to seem 'a wedding as had to be'. 'It's not a sudden-thought-of thing,' he added anxiously. 'Don't go for to think that.'

'Whoever did think it?' said Mrs. Shakeshaft.

'What's Deb say to it?'

'Oh, Deb!' John smiled broadly. 'Well, Deb, you see — Deb's in — oh, I wanna to say!'

Down at Slepe the small, empty cottage echoed. Joe whitewashed, hammered, forked the garden, brought home a small recalcitrant pig, and finally went to Silverton and bought the furniture with his modest savings. Lily went with him, and they took the road past Bitterly, stopping to interview Eli.

'Well,' said he, 'I give you the blessing of the Lord freely — freely. But I've nought else to give. Still, you wanna lack. He feedeth the young ravens that call upon Him. Get out, you fowls! — always running after me for sharps!' Joe hoped that he and Lily would not be kept as short as Eli's fowls. Lily went indoors, and came out with a small parcel — the severed locks. Mrs Arden, confronted with a sobbing Lily who could only ejaculate 'Ninepins!' — had set her wits to work, and remembered the ladies' papers in the People's Dining Saloon at Silverton market.

'Why, Lil,' she said, 'it's as clear as cider! You go in along of Joe when he goes after the furniture, and you take in your hair and get a switch

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made. It's quite the thing. The advertisements say no lady should be without one. Then you just pin it in among them curls, and coil it round, and there you are.'

Lily, having got her parcel, set herself to work on her father's pride, and finally squeezed thirty shillings out of him. Her small, rather forlorn heart was quite lit up by the joy of the shopping in store.

A ready-made white dress, a veil, a piece of artificial orange blossom, cotton gloves and the long-desired set of ribbon-trimmed undergarments — all these were at last stowed away in the trap, while Joe wandered from jeweller's to jeweller's, looking at such a multiplicity of rings that he became hopelessly confused.

'Whoa there, lad!' he apostrophized himself loudly, to the astonishment of the passers-by. 'Where's that little small one that I seed but now?'

Finally they went to choose the furniture in a whirl of haste and embarrassment, while a cool and dispassionate shop assistant yawned and wondered when it would be closing-time. Then they had tea. Joe's 'Tea and ham for two' was full of the tones of love, pride and ecstasy; but Lily was surreptitiously absorbed in her ribbons, and the waitress, like Gallio, 'cared for none of these things'.

The ostler at the 'Drover's Rest' had a good deal to say as he piled things into the trap and let down the back to accommodate the iron bedstead.

'You're lugging home the furniture and the girl and all, seemingly,' he said, surveying Joe's best cap with a piece of honeysuckle stuck in at the side. 'But I hanna seen the pram yet — no, I hanna.'

His face was convulsed with wrinkles of laughter. Joe looked at Lily out of the corner of his eye as they drove out of the cobbled yard. This was 'Something like!' he felt. Such things were the small-change of the marriage festival, and made him realize his fortune.

'Funny chap, eh, Lil?' he ventured.

'I don't like that sort of fun.'

'Of course not,' said Joe, much dashed.

They spoke of where the furniture would stand, and wondered if the weather would 'keep up', as they jogged home. They went through the great, golden plain of corn, set with jade-green meadows of aftermath, blue-green turnips and the black-green secrecy of woods. They had to pass through four little villages besides Slepe in the long twelve miles of

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quiet road. At each one, as evening drew on, the young men leaned against a wall or over a bridge, smoking, the day's work done, and setting up a hearty cheer when the trap hove in sight.

'Oh, dear!' said Lily. 'I feel all of a shake, like Quaker's grass.'

'Well,' Joe replied, with what was meant for comfort, 'it's nothing at all to what getting married is. But never you fret, Lil — it'll be o'er, so in or late, and you and me all by our lonesome in that there little place for good and all.'

'Look at them Wyandottes over there!' said Lily hastily. Joe was momentarily interested, and they fell back upon slight things until the long climb from Slepe began. Then Joe said —

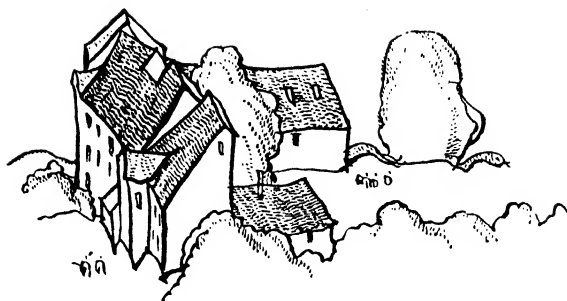
'I think you met let me kiss you now.'

'A'right.'

'And I'm going to put my arm round you too, tight. For we'll be man and wife the day after to-morrow.'

They came silently up the steep, half-obliterated track in the heather. Joe was quiet and soberly happy, Lily trepidant, very curious as to the new Joe who was appearing; she kept at arm's length the picture of the future, as conjured by Mrs. Arden's remarks. Mentally slipshod, she had none of the rare, sad, godlike faculty for seeing the end of a thing in its inception. Deborah possessed it in large measure.





CHAPTER 12

THE wedding-eve came on with unhurrying promptitude, and Joe's last preparations were made before noon. He lit the fire, put the kettle on the pothook and laid the tea with the new china. He surveyed it all with a man's unbounded pride in domestic work, remarking, "It do look summat odd!" He felt that it was worthy even of Lily. He ate his bread and cheese, washed and waited. Lily was to slip away in the early afternoon and come to see his work. He sat on the doorstep, and the honeysuckle round the porch dropped its limp, spent flowers about him — with the one broad petal lolling back like the tongue of a faery hound in age-long chase of a deathless quarry. The scent was thick in the garden, in the dusty lane, in the house. Joe drowsed and knew that whatever happened to him in the future he would not grumble — not even if he died in the workhouse, for this waiting was sweeter than the honeysuckle. The dense thickets of delight before him — thickets with no notice-board up, to which even the church pointed him on with kindly finger; the little faces (he rose here, and went to look again at the large brown tea-pot, marked *2s. 5½d. cash*); the years to come, with more and more of the tonic sweetness of nature in the little house day by day — all these shone before him in summer colours. He thought of to-morrow, with the gay walk to church, the walk back, the homely tea at Upper Leasowes, the loving comprehension that meant home for him. For it seemed to him that there was nothing about his thoughts unknown to his father; nothing about his hopes and fears with which Deborah did not sympathize; nothing about his bodily welfare that his mother did not forestall. All these emotions were quite dim and un-

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expressed; but they were none the less real to him. Then he thought how, when the rooks began to go home and the shadows to steal out of the hollows, and the first star sat like a bird on one arm of the devil's Chair, he would cease to be only 'the lad,' and 'our Joe', and 'owd Joe of Upper Leasurs'. He would be a woman's all in all, and on his strength of hand and clearness of eye would depend two fates — perhaps many fates. They would walk down the path, 'just ordinary', they would come to the village, pass beyond it, pass the wicket. He would shut the door.

'Joe Arden,' he apostrophized himself. 'you mun mind to give Lily a cup of tea, and you mun mind to leave her to settle a bit while you go and see to the pig. For even a cat wants to look about a bit in a new whome, and she's got a vast of strangeness afore her.'

He thought of Lily, and as he pondered on how his future peace and his to-morrow's rapture depended solely on her, were bought entirely at her cost, the sharp sweetness of human life — in which pain is the honey-suckle round the door — came over him in a rush.

'Such a little small thing as she be,' he thought. 'I canna make out why she took me. Women be won'erful.'

But, seeing that she had taken him, it never occurred to him to doubt for a second that she would sit down meekly in the shadow of the honey-suckle and be all a wife should.

The gate clicked and she was there. She had never looked so frail, so provocative; she had never been more purposeful or less desirous of admiration. They went in. Lily was genuinely pleased; after the rambling ruin at home, impossible to keep in order even for more industrious hands than hers, the compact, neat little home was delightful. She thought how easy the work would be. She was not meant for the hardy magnificence of manual labour. She should have belonged to the professional or tradesman's class, had a small 'general' to bully, and been able to say with pride to her friends, 'Oh, no, I never do any work, but I know how it should be done.' But here she felt a decided impetus in the direction of domesticity, because for the first time it was picturesque; for the first time she saw herself in a romantic setting of shelves, cupboards, clean paint and flowers. She had a vision of the vicar's wife alluding to her as 'Joe Arden's pretty wife who makes such good jelly.'

'It's real nice, Joe — dear.'

There was quite a little rill of affection in her voice. She had never been loved, and his deep thought for her, so quiet and unceasing, had touched her. It had wakened — as the prince did in the fairy tale — somewhere amid the dragon-like scales of her egotism a very sleepy, very illusive

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princess, who might, if all went well, sit up and rub her eyes and become a queen.

They looked at the pig, the geraniums, the apple-tree. They had tea for the first time out of the cups that had gold on their rims. It seemed to Joe that a flaming mist hovered in the kitchen. He bethought him of his responsibility as head of the house. He could no longer sit in silence and leave his father to do the honours and 'make things go'. No. The radiant, regrettable fact was that his father would not be here; *he* must crack the jokes and quote the wise old saws.

'Lil,' he said archly. 'What'll your name be this time to-morrow day?'

'Lilian Arden,' she replied, as sweetly as a small bird chirping.

'What else?'

'Mrs.'

'Aye. That means as I needna be feared of the little old 'ood.'

Lily puzzled over what he meant, till he suggested that they should come and see the rest. Up in the low-ceiled bedroom she understood.

'Oh, Joe! Oh, *dear* Joe!' she sobbed. 'I canna — I darena.'

'What's come o'er you, Lil? What's frit you?' Joe was quite dazed. Into the sunny room a shade had come, deep as the thunder-cloud shadows on the hills. He sat down gingerly on the bed, patient, mystified.

'I canna tell you — I canna!' said poor Lily. 'And oh! what a dear little room and all — and roses on the jug! Oh, dear — it's cruel hard.'

She ran to the window and knelt by the sill.

'I wish I was Deb,' she wailed. 'Deb's such an everyday sort. She never thinks of things like what I do. And so she dunna mind. She said to me on'ly to-day as I was a lucky girl — and so I am, only — only —'

'It's all a jumblement to me, what you're saying, Lil — like them anthems when they try who'll sing fastest. You tell me straight out, and it'll be clear as the Christmas star.'

Lily knew it would not. Even her own mind was not clear. Fear struggled there with curiosity, and fatalism brooded over all; she was like a clock without a mainspring, like a road with no signpost. Love would have taken away all need of thought, all curiosity, all fear. Where it led would not have mattered. The ways of lovers are many as the sheep-tracks on the mountains; but they all lead into the shadow-blue distance; into beauty; into rest; into stress and blessed grief and godlike laughter.

'Well?' Joe spoke with benevolent patience and large comfort. His benevolence, which took away the fire from his face for a while and left it as it was when he warmed the half-frozen January lambs, encouraged her.

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She rose and came towards him, and for the first time in her life real feeling, not overlaid by any pretence, was in her face. She sank by him on the floor.

'I canna go through,' she sobbed, 'it's — your mother said — about — this time next year.'

Joe understood.

'There, there!' he said, 'don't you werrit, my dear. Things just comes, you know. We'm just got to keep loving and read the Book a bit and it's all easy.'

'Not for me!' In her voice was the primeval cry of woman when sex comes upon her without the nimbus of love.

'No, I know. And I'm main sorry. And I'll do all I can to be a good chap, Lil. I swear I will. I'll cook for you and wash for you, and I wish I could do all for you; but I canna,' he said sadly.

'Joe!' She trembled. 'Couldn't we be just brother and sister?'

Joe stood up.

'Daze my 'ounds — no!' he shouted.

He knew nothing of other ways of love than his own — he never dreamed that lovers could be at once spiritual, passionate and childless.

'No!' he repeated tensely. 'All or nothing, Lil.'

Lily sobbed.

'Oh! I dunna want to be married and have chillun, and I dunna want to give up this nice little cottage and the veil — and all,' she moaned.

Down below, transfixed with wonder, Mrs. Arden stood with the little last gifts she had brought. She turned and crept out by the back way. They must never know what she had heard.

As she climbed home, like a very stout bluebottle in her print dress, she panted: 'Well, Joe mun find his own road now. Poor Lil — it's bad to be like that, well, well!'

She surveyed the landscape — huge, primeval, towered over by vast, fawn-coloured clouds which, in spite of its hugeness, were much too big for it.

'So long as they're fond on each other,' she murmured, as the swallows darted by with excited little snatches of song, 'nought matters. Not trouble, nor sickness, nor chillun, nor the lack of 'em.'

And with this speech, surprisingly tolerant considering her profession, she nodded at immensity as if she knew a thing or two not altogether to its credit.

Three hours later, out on the hill at the Leasowes, Joe waited for Lily.

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'Well,' he asked, 'have you reckoned it all up?'

'I canna reckon anything.'

'Well, what's the word — all or nought?'

'Oh! It *canna* be nought, Joe.'

'All then?'

'I s'pose so.'

'And the berries are worth the picking?'

There was anxiety in his voice. 'For certain sure?'

'I s'pose so.'

'Come thy way in, then,' shouted Joe uproariously, 'for I want my supper summat cruel, being that uneasy. Mother! Mother! give us a bit of summat to eat, and give Lil a drop of cider. Sit by me, Lil,' he added, holding her hand under the table. 'I'll do my best to suit you, Lil,' he whispered, 'and you shall set the pace.'

Then silence fell between them, while Deborah machined the seams of Mrs. Arden's wedding-dress, and Mrs. Arden explained that it had to be 'loosed out'.

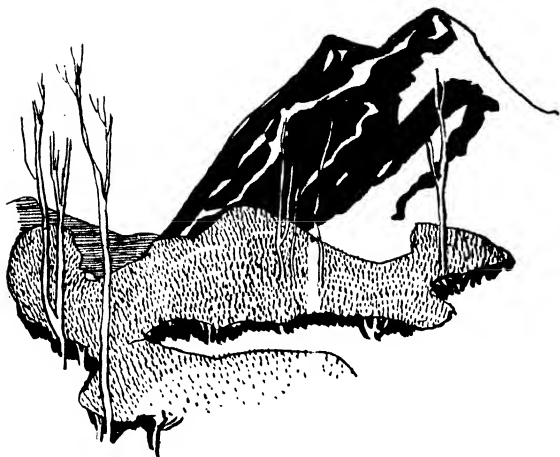
'For I never wore it atween the wedding and the christening,' she explained, 'and so it didna need altering.'

She saw Lily bite her lip.

'Lil, my dear,' she said, filled with a large and beautiful pity, 'I hanna given you much yet, and I was thinking maybe you'd like a tuthree of the bird cups. Now you just take your pick.'

So she gave her treasure without a second thought.

Lily's eyes filled with tears; her tired face lit up. Somehow to-night Mrs. Arden, whom she had never liked very much, was more protecting than Joe. She went to her and leaned on her chair, looking across at Joe's face — still a little stern from the conflict and the possibility of losing her — and a new sense of pride in him sang like a finch in her heart. But to-night Mrs. Arden, with her large charity, asking nothing, giving all; John, with his glance from which the hardness of youth had long passed; and Deborah, with her unruffled virginal absorption in the outside of the ceremony, were more comforting to Lily than all the length and breadth of Joe's love, all the mingled wine of passion. She chose the cups with childish delight, and as Mrs. Arden wrapped each one up, a second spark shone in Lily's heart, and she kissed the old woman of her own accord.



CHAPTER 13

THE day had come, clear and multiple-tinted, full of the sound of bees in the heather, and crickets at their endless spinning. Deborah was gathering her three tall lilies in the dew, with the pathetic generosity of sensitive temperaments that deny themselves a cherished beauty for the sake of a recipient who does not even see it.

'Dear Joe!' she thought; 'dear Lil! they'll only be married once; let them have the best of everything.'

Then, in a more mundane mood, she reflected humorously that she would now have her bed and her favourite blue sun-bonnet to herself, and no Lily to dog her footsteps when Stephen came.

She took the lilies upstairs.

'Just right for you, Lil,' she smiled.

'Does my hair look all right?' asked Lily absorbedly.

'Aye. Not a soul would know.'

Joe, on his way downstairs, knocked loudly and asked if he could come in.

'No! No!' they shrieked with much laughter. 'Get off with you!'

'Well, you come out then, Lily, and gie's a look at you. There's some one coming over the hill from Lostwithyn way, Deb; best hurry up with your own tittivating.'

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Lily came out. If she was never to have another triumph she had one now. Joe gazed at her with a long, humble, adoring look and said nothing at all. So much can a few shillings do for a woman!

Deborah, fastening her own dress at the back with great difficulty, had the air of a little girl who is showing off a doll, until she suddenly felt in the way and closed her door gently.

The lilies lay caressingly on Lily's arm; her white frock fell softly about her; the veil flowed from her small, corn-coloured head. It was a pity the lilies in her heart had not been tended. She flushed under Joe's look, and her eyes were like chicory-flowers.

'Lil!' said Joe softly, 'be you quite sure about what I asked you?'

Lily pouted.

'I'm not going to be asked questions on my wedding-day,' she said. 'Maybe it won't be for you to say "all or nought", so grand and solemn, Mister Joe! but to take what you can get.' She ran downstairs with a delicious consciousness of power. As she stood in the doorway athirst for admiration, Stephen came up. She gave him a long, slow smile and wished she could change bridegrooms; but his eyes were on Deborah, who came down in her delaine gown.

'For goodness' sake, somebody fasten me! I'm squeedged as a cuckoo in a sparrow's nest!' cried Mrs. Arden from the kitchen.

They started for church in great mirth, after an earnest discussion between Mrs. Arden and Deborah about the oven damper. They were accompanied by all the lambs — stout, close-curled, egocentric — but this escort fell away by twos and threes.

'Our Joe looks grand! Such a man and all, the very moral of his father!' Mrs. Arden whispered to John.

'Now, Mother! There's the making of a better man than me in him.'

'And young Stephen?' queried Patty; for in spiritual matters and in the winding of the clock John spoke with supreme authority.

'Well, he's got a goodish way to go; and it's a dark road to the heart of God when you grope by other men's lights; but at long last he'll be a fine chap — if he comes through — a fine chap.'

'I've taken a dislike to the marriage service,' Stephen was saying to Deborah. 'I can't stand being tied to anything, can you?'

'So long as you're tied where you want to be,' said Deborah impersonally, 'I don't see as it matters. You'd stay there anyway.'

'But who knows where he does want to be?' he asked restlessly.

'The wings of a dove,' John murmured; he was watching a pigeon against the dark profundities of the hills, and looking with tenderness on

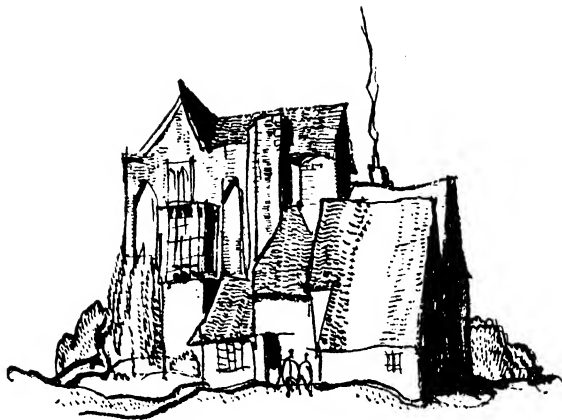
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the four who had life to face: 'The wings of a dove, to flee away and be at rest.' But he meant something quite different from the smooth longing in congregational singing — something vast and dark as the hills themselves and as all-satisfying.

'Yon's the Devil's Chair, Stephen!' said Deborah. 'Some say the ghosses go Thomasing there, to choose 'em a king. But they canna see him as they choose, for the mist; and the tale goes that when the ghosses see who's king it'll be the end of the 'orld.'

'I shall go to the Devil's Chair,' said Stephen, 'and find him.'





CHAPTER 14

WHEN they reached home again two wedding-guests were sitting on the wall — Eli and Lucy Thruckton.

'As the hymn says,' Eli remarked, 'child and parent meet again. Well, well! Now I suppose you'll be setting to in the manner of Genesis with the multiplication table, though there's fools enough and to spare as it is.'

Joe and Lily went in hurriedly.

'John,' he continued, 'those calves you bought look mighty bad. You're easy took in!'

John was ruffled. He was very sensitive about his business faculty, not having any. He also went in.

'Patty,' said Eli, 'I've brought these two fowls to grace the groaning board. They're no good for market, being of the black-fleshed kind.'

Mrs. Arden was put out at having more cooking to do when everything was ready. She thanked him somewhat hastily and took the lean little birds indoors.

'Well, Deborah!' The incorrigible old man turned to her next. 'Well! You're peart enough to-day, but what saith the Book of them that laugh? What did the daughter o' Babylon become?'

'And who have we here?' He nodded mockingly to Stephen.

'A very silly, jealous old man,' remarked he succinctly, and went in, followed by Lucy.

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'He's stuck as many hard words into me while you was at Church as cloves in a Christmas apple,' observed Lucy.

Eli turned to Rover, who watched him kindly but with dignity, as well-treated animals who have an assured position always do.

'If you was my dog,' he said, 'I'd give you a good hiding!'

Then he went in and sat down sourly to wait for tea.

Lucy had brought a large red flannel pin-cushion made by herself in the form of a very fat heart, fastened with coloured pins, with a large 'L. A.' also in pins.

Joe took upon himself to thank her, speaking of putting it 'on o r chessun-drawers', at which Lily blushed and whispered to Deborah —

'Where *shall* I look?

'At Joe,' replied Deborah amusedly.

Mrs. Arden dearly loved a festivity. Flowers, pretty colours, 'company manners' — these were dear to her as land to a sailor. She saw much of the dark side of life in her nursing of labourers' wives, women on lost hill-sides, wandering gipsies. She sat now in the shady room with the window open on the purple outside, pouring tea from the bright pewter pot and pressing food on every one until Lucy said —

'Well, I'm as full as a tick!'

Whereat the young men roared, and Lily murmured, 'Vulgar thing!'

After this the young ones wandered about the hill, and Stephen and Deborah strayed away. The plateau was drenched in gold light, splashed with grape-coloured shadow. A few berrypickers came and went on the skyline.

'Deborah,' said Stephen, 'd'you know that you are most awfully pretty?'

'Oh, no! I've only got straight hair, not wavy like Lily's.'

'Is it long?'

'Pretty fair. What be you doing?'

'Just feeling it.'

'Oh, you munna! Eh, dear! It's all coming down!'

He laughed, holding up a handful of hairpins.

'Suppose they see!' she cried.

'Come to the wood, then.'

'I don't like to.'

'Come!'

She went. Her hair fell in long, smooth tresses, touched with copper here and there by the sun. She was very much confused.

'I've never done such a thing!' she said.

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'You haven't let it down, I have. And you're the prettiest girl in the world.'

'Oh! what ever be you doing?'

He had picked up a long strand, putting it to his lips.

'Oh! you munna!' Deborah's vocabulary seemed to consist of exclamatory negatives.

'Why not?' asked Stephen.

'It's not right.'

'Everything's right if we love each other,' said Stephen, expressing a truth by accident.

Deborah was overwhelmed.

'You do love me, don't you, Deborah? I love you *madly*,' he said boyishly. He stooped and kissed her.

'I don't know.'

'Well, think! Quick! I've never seen any one a bit like you, and I want you, Deb!'

He flung himself at her feet on the pine-needles, and lay looking up at her — flushed, triumphant, admiring.

'Now!' he said, 'I shan't give you these pins back till you say, (1) If you'll come to Lammas Fair. (2) If you'll come to what-d'you-call-'em's chair. (3) If you'll sit on my knee now.'

'Well!' was all she could say. Such a wooing was different from anything she had ever dreamed of. Where were the conventions of the countryside, the 'walking-out', the gradual intimacy, the slow ritual of embraces? Once more she had a sense of insecurity, lack of poise. He was like a storm. He got up as suddenly as he had lain down, and sat by her on the log.

'Well, are you going to promise, or shall I chuck 'em in the stream?'

'Oh, dunna! Father and Mother'll think I'm so flighty if I go back with my hair down. And I'll never hear the last of it from Eli.'

'Then promise!'

This new self was a pleasant person, he found, albeit queer. His pulse was hammering; he was more excited than he had ever been.

'There goes one!' he said.

Deborah was distressed. Lammas Fair was all right; but she had a superstitious fear of the Devil's Chair, and as for sitting on his knee — why! they had only met four times. How could she?

'There goes another.'

'I'll come to Lammas Fair.'

'Yes! Go on!'



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'Not the rest.'

'There go two more, then. Only five left.'

'Oh! it won't stick up with less, it's so heavy!'

'Well, then —'

'I'll come to the Devil's Chair.'

'I'll save you the trouble of the last,' said Stephen. And behold! she was on his knee.

'Will you come and live with me, Deb, right away, so that I can always pull your hair down and kiss you?'

'I mun think,' she said tremulously; 'I mun be away from you and think a long while. For there's more to it than pulling hair down, Stephen, and kissing.'

'I know,' said Stephen, his face on fire.

But Deborah was not thinking of passion — the existence of which she barely guessed. She was thinking of the demands of a love that should possess her whole life, wondering if she dared enter upon it.

Flushed, confused, but firm, she emerged from the wood, doing up her hair as best she could.

'Well!' said Lily, superior in her dignity as a married woman, 'I think Deb's carrying on awful. Look at her hair! Any one can see as he undid it, look at his face.'

'I'll undo yours to-night,' Joe remarked, and Lily's new-found dignity collapsed.

'Let's have a song!' suggested Mrs. Arden when they went in; 'what d'you say, Lucy?'

Lucy never gave an opinion of any kind. She called it 'useless arguing'.

'Let's!' said Stephen enthusiastically.

So they sang glees till supper, while Eli sat with his mouth tightly shut, silent and sardonic. After supper, at which the fowls appeared veiled in sauce, John proposed a hymn or two. It grew late, and Joe nudged Lily.

'Just one more!' she pleaded.

'Let it be the Golden Arrow,' John suggested. 'It's an old song, Stephen, and it's about an ancient custom. In time gone by the lads and wenches in these parts used to go about Easter and look for the golden arrow. It met be along of them getting sally-blossom for Palm Sunday as the story came; but howsoever, they was used to go. And it was said that if two as were walking out found the arrow they'd cling to it fast though it met wound them sore. And it was said that there'd be a charm on 'em, and

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sorrow, and a vast of joy. And nought could part 'em, neither in the flower of life nor in the brown winrow. And the tale goes that once long ago two found it in the sally-thickets down yonder. And they came through Slepe singing, and with such a scent of apple-blow about 'em as never was — though apple-blow time was a full month off; and such a power of honeybees about 'em as you only see in summer-time. And they went like folks that want nought of any man, walking fast and looking fur. And never a soul saw them after.'

'Good riddance to bad rubbish!' said Eli, very bored.

'But every year,' John continued, 'when the ghosses go to the Dial, them as found the arrow come two by two, merry as whimbrels in a fine June. And every time St. Thomas comes round, there's a tuthree more of 'em, for there's allus some finds the arrow in the worst years. There's a good few old women as come first, in the tale; like wold ancient brown trees they be, groping and muttering, some saying, "Accorns for the pig, faggots for the fire; but we missed summat." And some saying, "We lived 'ard; we supped sorrow; we died respected; but we'm lonely." Then they all set up a cry like a yew-tree on a windy night: "Out o' mind! Out o' mind!" Then the ghosses stir like poplars, all grey and misty-like in a ring round the Chair, and there's no sound but sobbing.'

'An owd ewe with a hiccough, more like,' said Eli.

'Maybe there's more than the sound of sheep coughing on a wide mountain, so close under the power of the Lord,' John replied. 'Howsoever, in a bit there's a noise of singing, and in come the lovers, very glad-some, standing among the grey 'uns with a rosy light on 'em. And they one and all speak for the Flockmaster to be king — him as lights shepherds whome and carries the dropped foals.'

'What I allus say and allus will,' said Mrs. Arden, 'is that them grey ghosses as died respected are more to my liking than a gang of unruly folk with apple-blow, sheeding petals all o'er the place for Lord-knows-who to clean up.'

'Apple-blow,' remarked Eli in a heartbroken tone, 'as met have set into good cooking apples at seven shilling the pot.'

Lucy, who had been opening and shutting her mouth in a lethargic effort to speak, began in her circumstantial way —

'My Aunt Martha says as when she was a gurd —'

'Time out o' mind,' said Eli neatly.

'— there was used to be a waggon wi' three carthorses to lug 'un as went up a valley over yonder on Palm Sunday when folk went after the arrow. And whatever d'you think was in it, Mr. Southernwood?'

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Stephen was duly expectant.

'Sugar-plums!' said Lucy ecstatically. 'Sugar-plums and oranges full to the top. Eh! I wish they did it now!'

'Now, folks,' said John, 'take parts and tune up.'

'We have sought it, we have sought the golden arrow —'

They sang to a grave and wistful air with a lilt in it that enriched the words. Joe kept up the bass with great industry.

'Laws, Joe,' said his father, 'you din like a cuckoo on the chimney!'

'Let the lad be, Father,' whispered Patty; 'dunna you know the proverb —

*"Sing loud when you'm wed,
You'll sing soft enow on your jeath-bed"?"*

Lily's clear soprano rose above the rest. She was so happy and excited that she sang with more emotion than Deborah, who felt the symbolism while Lily felt nothing. She was so pleased to be admired in her new dress that she had quite forgotten her fears. She went down the hill with Joe, chattering like a cricket.

'Early on Monday I'll be here,' said Stephen to Deborah at the gate, 'and on Monday I want your answer.'

'What answer?'

'About living with me always, every day and every year.' His new self had nearly said 'night'. 'No backing out!'

'That's not in my line,' she said rather haughtily.

'Thank you for me,' Lucy Throckton was saying earnestly; 'it's been grand — tea *and* supper. Good night, all!'

'Well,' growled Eli, 'I never saw such people! Wasting good victuals and drink to persuade four young fools to do what they're only too ready to do without!'

He slammed the gate and departed in the deepening shadows — a hunched and grudging little figure in the frank and splendid hills.



CHAPTER I 5

JOE and Lily ran down the path like children.

Below, in a purple cup brimming with golden moonlight and covered by a lid of sky — jewelled like the cover of a wassail-cup — lay the small, huddled village of Slepe. The church tower — grey, square, knowing all winds, all rains, all snows, and regarding them but as the beating of small birds against its massive walls — rose out of a tall rookery. A farm or two, the vicarage, the school where Deborah and Joe learnt their less useful knowledge, the post office and a few cottages — these were all the human outposts between the empty valley and the lonely hills. When Joe and Lily reached the bottom of the cup they saw that even the bedroom windows were all dark; they heard cows breathing inimically behind hedges, while the stream (broad here with a sheen as of tapestry mirrored in armour) spoke with bated breath to the rook-burdened elms. They felt like conspirators.

‘If the dog at Low Levels barks, I shall skrike,’ said Lily.

They crept by the church. The clock ticked with loud, measured sounds over the intense rich quiet.

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'Isn't it a randy?' said Lily. 'It feels just as if we was doing wrong.'
'Aye.'

Joe spoke with relish, then added, 'But we're not; for we're taking the bitter along with the sweet. It's folks that want all ale and no work that do wrong.'

'Eh, dear-a-me! Why did you go for to damp it all?'

Lily began to cry under the sense of reaction, the remembrance of yesterday and the knowledge that she could not — as she had always dreamed — take her hair down and stand like a hair-oil advertisement before her bridegroom, but must surreptitiously and ingloriously take it off.

She hated her father; she mistrusted God; she edged away from Joe.

The soft night, like a moth, flitted on over the bloom and dust of the world.

'There now, Lil, don't take on,' said Joe. They came into the precincts of the honeysuckle. Joe unlocked the door.

'Laws! the old fire's out. Ne'er mind, Lil. You see how quick I'll start it and get you a cup o' tea.'

Lily sat by the stainless new kitchen-table in the dark and sobbed. The pig outside set up a yell for supper. Joe went to the back door.

'Hold your row,' he shouted. Then he poured such a generous libation of paraffin on the embers that there was a terrific roar. He was feeling very much of a householder, and very full of admiration for his father in bearing up so well for so many years.

'Now, Lil,' he said, 'look's a blaze! kettle will boil in no time.'

Lily was slightly consoled. She lingered over the tea, crumbling cake, drinking cup after cup, until Joe suggested that it was time to turn in. He locked up and lit the candle. Lily did not move.

'I'm comfor'ble here. Canna I bide here?'

'No,' Joe answered shortly. He, too, was tired, and it seemed so unlike his dreams.

'Come on this minute, Lil!'

She went.

Upstairs a bat flew round and round the room. Reality came upon Lily unbearably. She remembered the funeral of a girl friend and her baby.

'Oh, there's a bit-bat!' she wailed. 'It's a sign, Joe. I'm feared. Leave me go down to the kitchen; I want to go on as I be. Why should I slave and get ugly and sickly for the sake of brats I dunna want? What's the good? What was I born for? Look how Father treats me. I want to enjoy myself. I dunna want to do things nor put up wi' things — not for you

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nor any body. Oh, why did I ever take you, Joe Arden? And me so young and all, and you so set!

She flung her cotton gloves on the chest of drawers and threw Lucy's pin-cushion out of the window.

The shepherd's vast, vicarious sorrow came like a cloud over the mid-summer passion in Joe's face. He looked more like his father than ever.

'Now, now!' he whispered. 'You're tired, little 'un. See here, let's get these fanglements off and this pretty hair down —'

'Off,' said Lily hysterically.

'And then you'll have a good long sleep, and be right as a trivet.'

He helped her as his mother might have done, with the sexless solicitude that love brings when the beloved cries from the dark. He patted her as he did the lambs.

'There!' he said, 'now for that pretty night-gownd. Where is it?'

'Top of my box.' Lily spoke with small sobs.

'That's it! Now you go to sleep. We'll have a rare day to-morrow.'

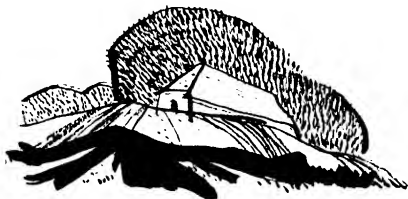
'Sit by me!' implored Lily, 'and dunna let the bit-bats come.'

This confidence in him was the sweetest thing life had yet given him. Sitting on Lily's box through the long hours with the small, ringed hand in his he was content. He watched Lily's face growing clearer as dawn came up in pearl armour from beyond the ranges. The honeysuckle scent surged in at the lattice; his arm grew stiffer.

'It'd be a poor thing if I couldna watch with her one hour,' he murmured, unconsciously scriptural.

'I mind what Father said, and what I never saw till now — for I'm a gawk, and that's the truth — "If there's any one in the 'orld besides Him that first said it as can say — this is my body, broken for you — it's a woman to the man she's set her heart on."'

Joe was unaware that Lily had barely begun to cultivate a heart.





CHAPTER 16

'WELL, I wonder what they're doing down at Slepe,' said Mrs. Arden, as they sat down to breakfast on Monday morning. 'My word, Deb! You be togged tip — you've waved your hair!'

Deborah blushed.

'I won't say as it dunna suit you. You look real nice — not like yourself at all,' she added with maternal candour. 'But I do wonder if they're hitting it off all right down there.'

'Well, Mother,' said John slowly, 'since we can't know why do you werrit?'

'Hark at him! "We can't know!"' Mrs Arden spoke tartly, for she felt flat after the festive week-end, and irritated at all the accumulated washing-up with no Deborah to help her. John's placidity brought down a storm on him.

'Hark at him! "We can't know!"' Speak for your own ignorant self, John, as can't see a thing nearer than the colour on the farthest-off hills, and that's not real, for it goes when you come up to them. Don't speak for me, as maybe knows a tuthree things you dunna!'

She snapped her lips and thought of Friday at Slepe.

John met this squarely, as he met all storms.

'Well, well, Mother,' he said, 'if I help you to dry them plates by and by, no doubt my ignorance'll mend. Rover!'

He was gone — straight, lean, dreaming on the far heights. The sheep, on their lawns near by, left their grazing to follow, pattering after him with an increasing sound as stray ones joined the flock, until he walked in

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muffled thunder of little feet and looked from a distance like one pursued by large snowflakes.

'Well, Mother, I'll be going now,' said Deborah.

Mrs. Arden looked at her face — lit, as John would have said, for marvels. She felt a crisis in the air.

'Deb,' she said, bringing from her store the best wisdom that she had, as she would have brought her cranberry jelly, 'dunna give till you're asked — aye, asked many and many a time — and then only through the gold ring, and chary-like.'

Deborah went out, overwhelmed that her secret had been discovered — ashamed, ecstatic, with a stress of joy in the high places of her being like the galloping of the ponies on the high sky-line. She had no more of the recommended chariness in her than there was in the bloom of the hills, the burning sunlight, the eternal song of the rock-springs that never failed.

She reached the signpost an hour too soon and sat down beneath its white arms, merged in rolling seas of heather.

Down at Slepe, just as she reached the signpost, Joe awoke, filled with a great new sense of well-being.

'Lil!' he whispered; 'it's gone seven. We'll be late!'

Lily slept on. Joe looked at her pale face, blue under the eyes, at the brown lashes still bright with half-dried tears. He looked at the lilies in the jug — the tallest of them was snapped, and rested its faded head on the soap-dish. He felt that he was to blame for it. If he had known the word, he would have called himself an iconoclast. He crept softly downstairs and lit the fire, pottering up and down with cups and bread-and-butter till the kettle boiled.

'I didn't ought to wake her, and she worn out,' he thought. 'All my fault too. But there! Deb'll be that cut up if we're not up to time.'

He hesitated.

'My lad!' he adjured himself, 'turn your back to the storm. For if Lil was tetchy yesterday, when I'd sat up all night along of her, what'll she be now?' He heaved a sigh of foreboding. But he had much to learn. On Lily's tired face, when he apologetically woke her, broke a smile so bewildering that he blinked.

'Why, Lil!'

She continued to look at him softly.

'Lil,' he said, 'd' you feel bad?'

'No, Joe.'

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'Be you sleepy?'

'No, Joe.'

'Be you wishing you was back along of Eli?'

'No.'

'What then, Lil?'

'I dunno.'

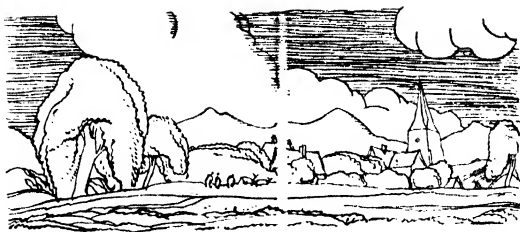
'Well,' said Joe, basking in the unexpected warmth and doubting the great doctrine of retributive reward and punishment; 'well, all I can say is, whatever you're thinking, it suits you, Lil. And now here's your breakfast, and then we must be off. And we've got a whole day,' he added delightedly, 'a whole day afore us.'

'I wish we needn't go,' said Lil.

'Not go? Why to goodness not?'

'I—don't know what to talk about to Deb,' Lil replied. 'Girls' talk is so dull.'

Joe laughed till the teacups rattled in their saucers. And by nine o'clock (when they should have been two miles away) they started.



CHAPTER 17

UNDER the white cross on the hill at Deborah and Stephen, he was voluble, she was silent.

'Well, if you won't, you won't,' he was saying. 'But why you consider it wrong for me to kiss your arm when I've kissed your mouth, Lord only knows.'

He threw sticks crossly at a huge green caterpillar crowned with gold that was crawling in the short grass.

'Dunna hurt it, Stephen!'

Stephen saw his chance.

'I'll stamp on it, if you don't let me kiss your arm.'

'Oh, well —'

Deborah spoke wearily.

'Oh, stop! There's Joe and Lil.'

'Hullo, Joe!' shouted Stephen. 'What's that about the newly wed?'

Joe sang out the rest of the couplet with enjoyment to the discomfiture of Deb and Lily.

They took their way through the solitudes, where innumerable sheep-tracks crossed and recrossed, Joe leading unerringly. The two girls dropped behind.

'Well, Lil?'

'Well, Deb?'

Sheep cried through the clear air; the two young men tramped in front — full of the pride of life, whistling, mimicking the sheep — quelled, when they paused for the girls, by a 'Get along, do!'

'Well, Lil?' said Deb again, after a long silence. She said it pleadingly,

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insistently. She was like one that sets out on a long journey, and waylays other travellers to ask for short cuts.

'Well?' echoed Lily, blandly and with an aggravating pretence of denseness. She remembered Deb's quiet scorn of her 'carryings on'. She was enjoying herself.

Deborah sighed.

'I thought,' she said sadly, 'as being friends and that, and me lending you my blue bonnet, and being Joe's sister and all — you'd have told me —'

'Well, Deb,' Lily replied, with icy superiority, 'I never thought you was one of them prying, curious girls.'

'Oh, no!' cried Deb hurriedly, 'only —'

'What?'

'You know I've thought time and agen of being an old maid.'

Lily laughed.

'Well, shall I or no?'

'You softie!'

'But I want to decide, Lil!'

'He'll decide,' answered Lily concisely.

'Oh!'

'You needn't worry your head.'

'Oh!'

'All that'll be left to you is —'

'What? Let's sit down, Lil.'

'You'll know all in good time,' said Lily.

'Are you two coming, or are we to come and fetch you?' shouted Stephen.

'Coming,' cried two voices hastily.

'Now then,' said Stephen; 'you old married folk trot on in front.'

'I like that!' chuckled Joe. 'And what about you?'

'We follow at our leisure,' replied Stephen.

'I bet you do.'

They had begun to descend. The interminable, winding valleys lay beneath in broadening vistas. Their steep sides were clad in amethyst, blue, gold, amber, crimson, copper — infinite colours, overlaid by the violet gauze of cloud shadows. All down their way stood foxgloves, and Stephen fitted a flower on each of Deborah's fingers. With them went a stream, rocking on its swift waters the yellow cradles of the mimulus, where tiny shadows slept. The hills closed in round them; the far prospect was gone, then the near view, then the ramparts in front; finally nothing



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remained but their own narrow way — multi-coloured, cricket-haunted, with a roof of blue sky laid across the hills above like a sheet of paper.

'Deb,' said Stephen, 'let's sit down. I want to talk to you.'

The atmosphere of joy round Joe was too much for him. He pulled the mimulus to pieces.

'Deb, I want to ask you a big thing.' She shut her eyes, and the sun fell on her calm face as it falls on a field of ripe wheat.

'I want to ask you, Deb,' he went on, his voice trembling a little with suspense and eagerness, 'if you'd live with me without —' He paused. The enormity of the thing in her eyes and in the eyes of her people suddenly appeared to him; but he was not of the kind to hesitate.

'Without marriage,' he finished.

Deborah lay back, motionless.

'You see,' he went on, very anxious to explain, 'it's such a mockery to me now, this last week — all that. I don't believe in it, and it seems such rot. And I always did hate fuss and promises and to be tied down.'

His eyes took their restless look. 'Sooner than that, I'd shoot myself!' he added, with the rash certainty of one who had never touched a gun.

'If you'll take me, Deb, I swear to you here and now that you'll never repent it. I'll love you far more than wives are loved, and be faithful to you for ever and ever — what the hell's that?'

A loud, raucous, mocking laugh, rather like Eli's had rung out far above them.

'Only the grouse,' said Deborah.

'What a din! It startled me.'

He was rather ashamed of his superstitious fear.

'Well, what do you say, Deborah?'

'Oh, I dunna know. It's all dark, Stephen.'

'But it's no different really. If people love each other, they stay together, whether they're married or not. If they don't, they don't.'

Deborah saw that clearly. What she did not see was his temperament — his way of shifting as the wind does before a stormy night, of striking out wildly, here — there — like a giant in the making; of dashing after every butterfly of a new idea as a poet does in his crude youth.

'Oh,' said Deb hopelessly; 'it couldna be. There's Father and Mother —'

'What do they matter, if you've got me?'

He stood there in stately youth, like a sapling by the water.

'And Joe —'

'What does Joe matter? He's got his own boat to steer.'

'He'd liefer see me dead.'

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'Why?'

'Well, about here, you see, we set a lot of store by marriage. Wed, a d grey's white. Dunna wed, and white's black.'

'Of course, if you think more of Joe than me —'

'Oh, you know I dunna.'

'Well, then!'

It was his own incorrigible reasoning.

'And the neighbours — Mrs. Shakeshaft and all —'

'We'll go off together, and let them say their silly say.'

'And Eli —'

Her face grew quite rigid as she thought of his creaking voice upbraiding her, calling her a sinner.

'Damn Eli!'

'And —' Deborah took her courage in both hands — 'and me.'

'You?' he questioned.

'Aye, me. I'm like other women, and I want what they want — a ring, and to be "Mrs."'

Her lip trembled.

'Well,' he said with young egotism, 'if I'm not enough to make up for that, I'm sorry.'

He turned away.

'Oh, dunna go, Stephen — dunna! Let me think a bit!'

'I don't like half-hearted givers,' said Stephen coldly, for he was very eager and her hesitation tortured him.

'I'm not, I'm not!' cried Deborah, deeply hurt — for generosity was her strongest instinct. She stood up, very straight and gracious in the blue delaine. The tower-like hillsides became a mere background for her, the colours grouped themselves behind her like meek waiting-maids. She stood like the goddess of some rich land. Her eyes were tender, agonized and haughty.

'Stephen,' she said, as he looked at her with bent head and both hands out towards her; 'Stephen, I'm no niggard. If I give, I give wi'out stint and of the best I've got. But the heartbreak and the sorrow as you're bringing on them I love, is a'most more than I can bear. Do you love me true, Stephen Southernwood?'

'Yes, Deborah.'

'Will you love me on to the last turning and the end of the road?'

'Yes,' he said rather impatiently.

'Do you want me so bad that you're lost without me?'

There was a note of wistfulness in her voice.

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'Of course. Oh, Deborah, say yes!'

'Stephen,' she said, with her father's unhurried utterance; 'are you certain sure?'

'Before God, I am!' he cried — with truth, for he was at that moment. But he did not realize that he was dynamic, while she was static, and that the crash of such temperaments is wilder than the crash of worlds.

'Then, Stephen,' she said, with a clear look at him, standing in a pool of shadow; 'then — you can ask me.'

He flung himself at her feet.

'Will you be my sweetheart, Deborah Arden, and my mate, and the love of my life?'

She put out a hesitating hand and touched his hair, damp on his forehead.

'What a lad you are!' she murmured, motherly.

'Answer, Deb!' he said passionately.

'Aye. I'll be your sweetheart,' she said softly, 'and your mate, till I lie in the daisies, and the love of your life, while life lasts.'

A wandering seed of thistledown drifted slowly across the cwm, very high up, from one steep to another without descending, as if it walked on an aery bridge to an aery destiny.

'And now,' Deborah said, 'let's go on to the others, for I've no more to give and no more to say for a while.'

'But, Deb! I was just going to kiss you.'

'Not now — not just after that. I'd as lief kiss in church. It's a new road we've started on, Stephen,' she added, with the sense of desolation creeping over her again; 'a new road, and it may be a waidy one. Never loose my hand, lad!'

'Never! Not for all the old devils up yonder,' said Stephen, nodding in the direction of the Devil's Chair — hidden from them now, but set high above the country like a black pearl in a troubled sea of mist, for the thunder had come round and muttered in the west. The grouse laughed again.



CHAPTER 18

'Yo-ho!' came Joe's voice from far down the path. 'Well, you laggar ls!' he bawled, as they came up.

'The path's so twisty,' said Stephen.

'The path's straight enow.' Joe looked at Stephen, contemplatively. 'There's nought wrong with the path,' he added, 'but maybe you're a twisty walker, Southernwood.'

Deborah sighed.

As the last valley widened and the hills swung back, they heard the distant, plaintive music of the merry-go-round at Shepwardine — like a bee in a jam-pot. They came down the quaint street, by the old market, where fruit was set out so temptingly that Joe bought two enormous melons, which he carried under his arms. The street was full of country-folk, interspersed with visitors who hoped to attain the peace of the countryside without its toil. Strings of hill-ponies went by, droves of bullocks, sheep with red letters on their shorn bodies.

Joe steered for the merry-go-round, and Deborah saw above the crowd, above Joe, above everything in the world, she thought, Stephen's bright head and keen face, eager for joy.

'Good morning, Mrs. Arden!' said Lucy Thruckton primly. She was sitting on the grass with a bottle of ginger-beer.

'Hullo, Joe!' shouted various friends. One irrepressible from beyond Lostwithyn, seeing the melons, called out —

'So you've brought the twins!'

'If you be market-peart, Charlie Camlin, you needna blazon it.'

'Be you coming, Lucy?' asked Deborah, as they took their seats on the merry-go-round.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'No. I'm thinking it's a toil of a pleasure.'

Deborah thought that many pleasures were like that.

Eli came up. He was here to look for a housekeeper, and had been treated with contumely by two ladies upon stating his terms. He was annoyed.

'Turn ye, turn ye!' he intoned, coming up to them just as the hobby-horses started.

'We be!' said Joe, amazed at his own wit; 'as fast as ever we can.'

There was a roar. They began to move to the tune of 'Oh, where is my lad to-night?'

Eli stumped off.

Stephen's eyes were ablaze. He loved quick motion, music, colour. He had an arm round Deborah, and the more excited he was, the more like iron it grew.

'Oh, Stephen!' she pleaded; 'loose me go!'

But he was beside himself with excitement, the fulfilment of his emotional and poetic love of beauty, and crude life.

'I won't,' he said.

'Oh, do 'ee, Stephen! You're hurting me.'

The merry-go-round was in full swing, racing madly, the music at its loudest and quickest.

He bent down.

'Deb,' he shouted, with his mouth close to her ear, his eyes holding hers, dominant, flashing blue fire; 'Deb — when?'

'You're hurting me, Stephen.'

'Then, say!'

'Oh, Stephen — and you said you were fond of me.'

'I tell you it's *because* I'm fond of you.' He spoke in a hard voice, holding her tighter. His logic seemed unanswerable to him. He was without Joe's dumb apology for the ways of nature. His arm never slackened, though the tune did. He had no idea where he was; he was so intent on his desire.

'Say when!' he repeated.

'I dunna know what you mean.'

'That's a lie!'

He jumped from the roundabout before it stopped, and disappeared.

Deborah felt faint. She had no compass to help her in this extraordinarily stormy sea, and she was frightened.

Lily immediately alleged that she felt faint, too.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'Dear sakes, what a gawk I am!' said Joe. 'I'd never ought to have let you go on.'

'By the faintness o' young women,' said the roundabout proprietor with camaraderie, 'the chapels is filled.'

He nudged Joe in the ribs.

'Some folks have no manners,' said Lily.

Lucy Throckton gaped in happy bewilderment.

Lily was annoyed at her air of being above all these things, possessed of herself alone.

'Lucy,' she asked sweetly, 'should you like a lover?'

'Aye.'

'And a wedding-ring?'

'Aye.'

'And a veil?'

'Aye.'

'And a cow to give you quarts and quarts of milk?'

'Aye.'

'And children to do the work for you?'

'Aye.'

'Well,' said Lily, with a foxlike snap of her small teeth, 'you won't never have none of them — so there, you fat thing!'

Deborah sat drearily with Lucy, while Lily and Joe wandered about. At last she saw Stephen in the distance. He was coming towards her. Both his hands were full of roses — such roses as she had never possessed, for it was cold on the hills. He must have spent half a week's pay on them, she thought, horrified. He flung them — crimson, honey-coloured, pink — into her lap and himself on the ground.

'I'm a beast,' he said; 'a frightful beast! I won't do it again, Deb — I'll be a good boy.'

He looked up with humility in his eyes.

She found the humility delicious.

'There, there!' she said. 'It's all right. Only do get up,' she added, surveying him with almost jealous pride; 'folks are staring.'

He got up.

'And now,' he said, selecting a fat, red rose and presenting it to Lucy with a kindly little smile, 'here's one for Miss Throckton.'

He had noticed Lucy's clouded face; perceptiveness was one of his gifts. He could not bear that anyone's joy should be dimmed. Joy was so fleeting, he felt, so easily missed, and night came down so fast on the Fair.

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They went home through the dusk. Before they reached the little wood, the sky was seeded over with dim stars like pearls. Stephen snoked, bit his pipe-stem, kicked at boulders and was silent. He had constituted himself the gaoler of his desires and he did not like the post. Deborah made little attempts at conversation; but they were both beyond such palliatives of a crisis. They had come to the point where emotions are crude and huge — like a naked land of beetling rock. They reached the place of Deborah's morning promise. Joe and Lily were ahead. Deborah looked up and smiled, forgetting in her joy the pain that went with it.

'It's the secret cwm,' she said, 'where the arrow was.'

The smile, so sweetly lavish in the faint light, was too much for Stephen. He caught her hands.

'I want that kiss.'

'I'd liefer not.'

'Well, of all the —! D'you love me?'

'Aye, Stephen. I love you true.'

'Well, then! I kissed you in the little wood. Didn't you like it?'

'Not all that. It made me feel queer-like.'

Stephen was exasperated.

'Look here,' he said, 'we'll have this out. D'you know what marriage means?'

'I'd liefer not talk of such things yet.'

'Oh! Well, I choose to, so I shall. Do you know what it means?'

'Aye.'

'Well, living with me will be the same.'

'Aye.'

'So if you can't even do with kissing —'

Deborah was in despair. She had her code, she had summed up life; marriage and all its cares, griefs and joys came into her sum of things. But passion was new, terrible. She had not realized the feelings involved in it. She had thought of herself as a wife, with the same emotions, the same poise, as she had in her maidenhood. To many women marriage is only this. It is merely a physical change impinging on their ordinary nature, leaving their mentality untouched, their self-possession intact. They are not burnt by even the red fire of physical passion — far less by the white fire of love. For this last Deborah was prepared; she had felt its touch without shrinking. But when Stephen kissed her in the wood, a new self awoke in her. She was horrified; she needed time to fuse the two fires, to realize that in unity they were both pure. She gazed into the dusk with averted head. Stephen still had her hands.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'How did you feel when I kissed you?'

'Canna we go on, Stephen?'

'Not till you say how you felt.'

'Fainty-like.'

'What else?' The merciless catechism went on.

'And — as if I was — no better than I should be,' she whispered, too honest to prevaricate, too genuinely simple to realize the provocation of her words.

Stephen bit his lip.

'And yet you didn't like it?'

'No.'

'Well, it's time you learnt to. So I'll take what I've a right to.'

She held herself stiffly under his kisses, then drooped in spite of herself with the sweetness of them.

'Now,' he said, 'you shall go on.'

He walked with his arm round her

'When can I come and fetch you?' he asked, with the wooer's instinct to seize the moment of weakness.

'Oh, Stephen, dunna ask me yet! leave me a bit!'

'Why?'

'To get them used to it at whome — and to get used to it for myself.'

Suddenly indignation awoke in her. She disengaged his arm and confronted him, dignified and determined.

'If you dunna do as I ask — aye, do it quick and eager — you dunna love me, Stephen. And if you dunna love me — beyond kissing and that — there's no right road for us but the parted road. I'll do without a ring and a bell, I'll bear with the black looks of all and the trouble of them at whome. Aye —' she gave a little sob — 'I'll give up the name of wife for you, Stephen, if you say so. But —' a scarlet flush surged over her — 'go to an unhallowed bed I won't. I'd liefer die. Love hallows all,' she added softly — 'the kind of love that gives, and asks nought.'

Stephen looked at her ashamedly.

'But I can't give up — I can't go against nature,' he said helplessly.

'I know you canna,' said Deborah. She was slowly, but surely, attaining the new balance which she needed, the larger wisdom.

'I know you canna,' she repeated. 'I'm not the woman to wed a man that could. Only' — she sought about for an illustration — 'only you'd ought to feel like Mother and Father feel to me, and like the flockmaster would feel to the lambs, as well as what you feel as my man.'

Stephen laughed to hide his awkwardness.

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'A regular family party!' he said.

Deborah frowned. Then she forgave his flippancy and smiled.

'Aye,' she said. 'And when you feel like all of them —'

'Well, what?'

'I'll maybe give in about kissing.'

'I feel like them all now,' said Stephen, 'and more.'

'Then you'll do what I ask you,' replied Deborah composedly, 'and leave me be.'

'All right. But I want my answer. When can I come and fetch you? Will you tell me on Sunday, when we go to the Devil's Chair?'

Deborah pondered.

'Aye,' she promised. 'Come Sunday, I'll say.'

They went on up the cwm, parting at the signpost. The Devil's Chair loomed across the valley, blotting Hesperus from the glimmering sky.





CHAPTER 19

WHEN Deborah got home her father was lighting the lamp outside her door. In spite of Mrs. Arden's remonstrances he had always done this since Deborah fell down the sharply turned stairs as a child. Punctually, like a sunset bell or a watch light, it shone at nightfall; equally punctually Mrs. Arden's voice was vigorously raised about 'spendthrift ways'. The lamp comforted Deborah now.

She followed him about dumbly all the week, finding his calm strengthening.

'Deb's mased, I think,' said Mrs. Arden to John. 'She doesn't do a hand's turn for me. I shall give her a bit of my mind.'

'Never cut love, Mother,' he replied, in his wistful way.

On Saturday night Deborah suggested that they should sing 'Lead, Kindly Light!' So she and John sang it in the scented night, while Mrs. Arden — who called it 'that miserable, miauling thing', and disapproved of hymns on a week-day — washed up remonstratingly in the back kitchen.

'The light leads through queer ways, Deb, time and agen,' said John; 'bogs and suchlike. But it takes you somewhere at long last. It's no marsh-fire.'

August had come on the land like a flame. Only primary colours were left. Day by day the Devil's Chair shook in the heat haze as though it would fall. Opposite, by the Little Wood on the Wilderhope range, the shepherd's signpost, blistered in the sun, confronted it whitely. Between the ranges lay the valley, shadowed alternately by each. All round was the restless plain.

On Sunday Deborah had the basket packed, with matches for Stephen's pipe, when he came to the door.

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'So you've come all the way only to go back to Lostwithin again!' said Mrs. Arden.

'It's worth the walk.' Stephen looked at Deborah — flushed and radiant.

'So you're off picnicking,' John spoke meditatively. He never treated trifles lightly, because he saw their hidden meanings.

'A wild-goose chase I call it.' Mrs. Arden surveyed them amusedly, but indulgently.

John looked steadfastly at Stephen.

'She's all we have now the lad's gone,' he said.

Stephen fidgeted.

'Aye! We miss the lad.' Mrs. Arden shook her head as she packed the breakfast things on the tray. 'He says to me, "I'll be up every day, Mother!" But I knew he never would. It's not in nature.'

'Shall I carry that tray?' asked Stephen; 'it's heavy for you.'

'I've carried more than that in my time, thank you all the same, lad, or where would your sweetheart be?'

'Now, Mother!' John cautioned.

Stephen looked round to see if Deborah minded: but she was in the garden, leaning on the gate, gazing at the signpost far along the hill.

'Well, we'll be off now,' said Stephen, taking command with his usual decision. They started; John and Patty waved to them from the gate.

'Dunna be late,' they called.

It was all unbearable to Deborah.

'Hark at the pigeons breaking their hearts in the wood,' she sighed, as they descended into the valley. 'How can I tell 'em at whome, Stephen?'

'Lord! you'd think it was a black crime.'

'So it be to Mother. Maybe not so much to Father. He sees out an' beyond things.'

They walked apart. Stephen was genuinely repentant, ashamed of his new self. Deborah was withdrawn in the gloom of foreboding. He did not touch her; his look was comradely. They talked about trees and birds, and the changing seasons that she knew like a rosary. She became more at ease.

Stephen was a strange anomaly.

He was too perceptive for a ploughman, too vital for a gentleman. His mind was at present a confused mass of other people's principles, non-principles, creeds, negations: but beneath them lurked a poet.

They began to climb towards the Chair.

'Your old fellow's damned hard to get at, Deb!' Stephen mopped his face.

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He gave her his arm up the steepest part, and was immediately overwhelmed with longing to kiss her.

Deborah stopped.

'Can we go back, please, Stephen? I've ne'er been here afore, and I don't like it.'

The Chair had begun to loom large on the sky.

'Rather not,' said Stephen.

'Please!' She was sweetly feminine in her manner of asking. She was one of the women who depend on their own charm and dignity for what they want from their men — not needing legislation. She was not often refused.

'All right. But I'm beastly disappointed.'

Stephen turned round with depressed shoulders and a most forlorn expression.

Deborah felt selfish.

'We'll go on, if so be you want to,' she said.

So on they went.

On the cold northern slopes round the Chair the heather was hardly in bud. Cranberry buds of most waxen whiteness hung against the rock like tears. Not a creature was visible. Stephen climbed out of the shadow beneath the throne on to its jagged masses, and called to Deborah to follow.

'Oh! No — no — no, Stephen.'

'Don't be silly.'

'It's black harm for us both.'

'Now what harm can come to us, when we love each other so?'

His words dropped into the silence and were swallowed. In the intense quiescence of the place one might almost have imagined mockery.

'Now, Deb! See how good I've been! I've never once taken my rights as your lover.'

'Rights?' said Deborah faintly. She had always belonged to herself completely, always been reserved, poised like a windhover. She looked up at him, standing on the top of the Chair with a kind of easy mastery about him. Was it a symbol? Could he shield her from harm, as he said? He was very strong. She supposed he could.

She climbed up; he stretched his hand out.

'Hold hard on to me,' he said cheerfully, 'and you'll be as right as right.'

'I allus will,' she answered.

The stone under his foot slipped, and he fell on to the flat rocks that made the seat of the Chair. She swayed, but recovered by loosing his



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hand. He laughed; but to her it was a portent, and she would stay there no more.

They wandered down the northward slope, where a row of blasted trees stood like a broken-toothed comb. Beneath them was a partially ruined cottage.

'We might live here if it was repaired,' said he, delightedly, 'as Lost-within is only just down there — it would be nothing of a walk.'

Deborah shuddered.

They had their meal, and lingered in the shade until a little breeze sprang up.

His mood had changed.

'May I put my arm round you, dear?' he asked.

'Aye.'

'Do you like it there?'

She smiled.

'Maybe, Stephen.'

'Very much?'

'Aye.'

'Then may I kiss you?'

Deborah gave him her lips. He kissed her throat, pulling her blue bow aside.

'No,' she said flatly.

'Only just under the bow!'

'Not till we'm wed. Oh, dear! I forgot.'

She gazed at him in distress.

'We'll count that we're wed now, Deb.'

'Oh, no! things must be done decent.'

She had an innate mistrust of the swift gratification of wishes.

'Well, I can't wait for ever, Deb!'

He had quite forgotten that he had only known her for a fortnight.

'We must decide things, you know,' he reasoned.

'Not yet awhile.'

'Yes, to-night. On the way home.'

'You're so hasty, Stephen.'

'Well, would you be pleased if I wasn't? I shouldn't be if you weren't so pretty, Deb!' His arm tightened.

'No, Stephen.'

'I'll be good all the way home, and talk about silly birds and things,' he said, laughing.

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'We'll go back now, then.'

He strove very hard to come up to her demure standard all the way; but his eyes were so pleading, he helped her over stiles so carefully and brought her flowers with such a depressed look that she felt as if she had done wrong.

He was silent most of the way.

As they neared High Leasowes, he said —

'Well?'

'What?'

'When is it to be? When will you come?'

'I dunna know.'

'I can't go on over yonder without you. I shall chuck it and come and live at Slepe.'

'But you canna leave your work!'

'Oh, hang the work!'

'But look 'ee, Stephen! I've got to tell Father and Mother, and I dunna know how to.'

'But as you must, it may as well be soon as late.'

'Aye.'

'Well then, when?'

They reached the door. Pinned to it was a paper. Written on this in Mrs. Arden's large hand was 'Had a call to Black Cwm. Father will wait to bring me back in the morning. Go to Joe's if lonesome.'

Deborah had a swift intuition. She snatched the paper from the door, and crumpled it in her hand.

'I've seen it,' said Stephen, 'over your shoulder.'

They looked at each other, while the light slipped from the valleys.



CHAPTER 20

'ARE you going to ask me to stay to supper, Deborah?' he said steadily
'If you've a mind to.'

The surge of joy and foreboding in her heart nearly stifled her. She turned with relief to make up the fire and lay the table. He ran to-and-fro in his shirt-sleeves, fetching things for her. He brought coal and made his face black. Then his collar came undone.

'There!' said he, 'that's how I look at the mine.'

She looked at him admiringly. How young he was to be a foreman! How tall he was! What a way he had with him!

They laughed about his black face.

'You can wash you in the back kitchen, while I go up and do my hair,' she said. Half-way upstairs she stopped. There was the lamp, lit. It must have been lit hours ago, ready for her. It was like a glance from her father. And she had to tell him —! The price was too great, she felt. Yet how could she give Stephen up? It never occurred to either of them that he might have sacrificed his principle — or whim. At present his opinions, though short-lived, possessed him entirely. It did not occur to him that Deborah was sacrificing all — he, nothing.

After supper they talked softly, he on the hearthrug at her feet.

'I'll get you a window-full of geraniums,' he said, 'for our cottage. And we'll have red tiles, like these, and a chiming clock, and a roaring fire.'

Deborah forgot, in the warm picture, the darker side of her love-story.

'And an arm-chair for the maister,' she said.

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'Oh, you darling! But I shall want to sit at your feet.'

'You'll soon tire o' that,' said Deborah, amused.

It was strange to see him there, so bright and eager, when she was used to her father and mother and Joe, with their quiet ways and sober looks.

'I've got something for you,' he said. He opened a little box, and there lay a ring.

'For me?'

'Yes, I didn't see why you shouldn't have your ring.'

'But how did you get it?'

'Walked to Silvertown.'

'Walked all that waidy road?'

'Yes, for you. And now, when can I put it on? I shall make you a vow when I do.'

'Oh, I dunna know.'

The look she was beginning to know came into his face.

'Let it be here and now,' he said.

'No, no.'

'Deborah, I might die to-morrow. I might get crushed in the mine.' He spoke without the least abatement of vitality.

'Oh, hush!' she moaned.

'And think how you'd feel.'

'Don't 'ee!'

'Well, then' — it was the inevitable, unanswerable argument.

He took her hand, which hung limp by her side, and put the ring on her finger.

'Deborah Arden,' he said, 'with this ring I plight you my troth for ever. I worship you body and soul. Amen. Now, Deborah, I shall consider you my wife.'

The years to come, with their mighty, hollow thunder, beat upon Deborah's brain. The past, with its round completeness of kindly intercourse, rippled behind her like a lilled lake. Only the present she could not realize. He was the present. He was the future also — eternity. Should she grudge him a golden hour? She thrilled to feel his arm round her, hard as it had been at the Fair. What a man he was! — her man. What a lad! — hers.

The wind rose and fingered the windows, trying the door, feeling for a crevice.

'The time's so short for enjoying ourselves, Deb.'

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'I know it be.'

The more she hesitated, the more unbearable he found any hesitation.

'You don't care about me a bit!' he cried at last. 'You don't know what love is. I'd better go.'

'Maybe you better had,' said Deborah sorrowfully.

She went to the stairs door and opened it.

'Look at that lamp!' she said. 'Lit for me, nights — never a one missed for three-and-twenty years. And you say I dunna know what love is! Can you say you've done as much for me?'

'I will do as much — more.'

'Maybe.'

'Well, I must say!' He was in a towering rage. The more he longed for Deborah, the more angry he became. He flung his coat on.

'Good night!' he said bitterly. 'Now you can go to Joe's.'

She suddenly had a vision of him lying somewhere at Lostwith-in — silent, with shut eyes, never to ask her anything again. Suppose such a thing happened! Such things did. There he was now — alive, loving her, wanting her — now, to-night. Any other night might be too late. She clung to the door. Her hands were cold, her lips dry. Life would be no good to her without him. And here they were, warmly shut in together from the world.

'It's as if it was to be,' she thought. And now — she was sending him away.

He turned at the gate with a tragic look.

'We might have been so happy!' he said accusingly.

She ran to the gate.

'Oh, come back!' she cried, sobbing and pulling his sleeve like a child; 'come back into the warm, and don't see talk in that awful way about dying.'

She clung to his coat. It was the only way to fight the horror that had come on her at his words. She pulled him in and shut the door.

'And now,' he said, smiling at her in complete unconsciousness of the agony of mind he had given her, 'come and sit on my knee.'

She sat on the arm of his chair.

'Why, Deb! Your hand's trembling.'

'Oh, no! I'm never one to tremble,' said Deb; 'I can skim as clean as anybody.'

'I'm a beast. Oh, Deb, forgive me! But you're always forgiving me,' he added, hitting his forehead with the unmerciful thoroughness of an

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actor — but without affectation, for it was natural to him to make his emotions pictorial.

‘Of course I be,’ said Deborah.

His young self-absorption was pierced for a moment, like thick woods by early sunlight. He looked up at her solemnly.

‘Deb!’ he said, and there was a kind of dull terror in his voice — ‘Deb! If ever you stop forgiving me, I shall be done for. Never stop forgiving me, Deb! Stick to me, Deb!’

He besought her like a child in the dark.

‘I will that!’ said Deborah, with her warm, maternal smile.

From without, somewhere on the empty table-land, came a long, shuddering cry; in its trembling ferocity it was like the curse of a hag.

‘It’s only the owls saying “What ails you?”,’ said Deborah.

‘I don’t care about these old hills of yours as much as I did,’ he said uneasily; ‘you’ve got such damned funny birds here.’

But Deborah was still following her previous train of thought.

‘I couldna stop forgiving of you,’ she said softly, ‘it’s so mortal sweet — unless you stopped wanting me to.’

‘That I never shall,’ he answered with certainty, and nestled his head against her arm.

‘You’re tired,’ said Deborah.

‘Oh, no! I’m never tired.’

But his flush betrayed him.

‘It’s time you went to sleep,’ said Deborah, motherliness driving out all other feelings. Her tenderness, the vague, illimitable love in her — vague as rings in water, widening eternally — touched a chord in him that had never yet sounded. Within the rather tinny, meaningless music of his untried youth this hint of manhood struck out a presage of grandeur. It was Deborah’s justification for her sacrifice.

He stood up, his arm among the brass candlesticks and pewter pots on the high mantelpiece.

‘Deborah,’ he said, in a voice that enraged him by the way it went up and down. ‘Deborah! I’ll sleep out in the shippen to-night. Rover and the cows are good enough company for me,’ he added, with a little forced laugh.

He turned impetuously to the door — dreadfully disappointed that he should feel so flat after doing so great a thing.

‘Beastly stale,’ he cogitated, as he surveyed the inside of the shippen with great disfavour; ‘beastly stale doing the decent thing. Here! get out, you old dunderhead!’ he apostrophized Wimberry; ‘put your fat self

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between me and the door, for the Lord's sake — or out I shall go. Ouf! What a stench! . . . And Deb never said a word!

Deborah had not been able to say a word. She had never seen him look so splendid. He seemed to tower in the little place. It was her nature to see the beloved's small, plain doings as noble. For her, when Stephen was most mundane, a nimbus was about his head. When he was angry — when he was cold and selfish — still more in those mad moments at the Fair and on the way home, when he was masterful with a cruelty that was (though she would not confess it) intoxicating as the first mad autumn winds to her, at all these times she determinedly saw in him only the greatness. Now in these few moments there had really been only greatness. A profundity she had not dreamed of, had not asked for, had shown in him. It was like coming to a sudden splendid valley, full of deep colours, after walking a bare hillside. Renunciation was to him like stepping a runaway cart downhill. She dimly felt that he was not made for it. She rocked herself softly in the firelight.

'Glory and honour and power,' she murmured. 'Aye! them's his by rights. And he does so mislike the smell o' cows.' She smiled at this in spite of herself.

'And for me,' she thought, 'Deborah Arden of the Upper Leasurs, with straight hair and no book-learning, he's gone to the shippen along of the cows.'

She thought of a carol about 'a kingly stranger' and a stable. There seemed to her nothing incongruous in associating him with it.

'And it inna as if he only wanted to stay along of me *a bit*,' she thought, with a lift of the head. 'No! He wanted to stay more than anything in the 'orld.'

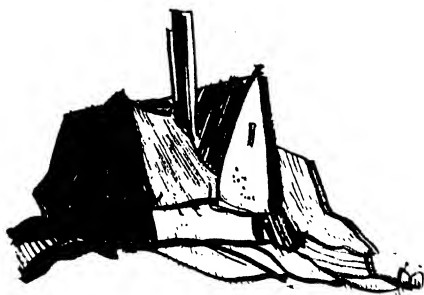
Colour surged over her. Her hand was on the little bow at her neck. 'I wouldna let him touch it this afternoon,' she murmured in a sudden confusion of pride and trembling. She hummed to herself the roundabout air — 'Oh, where is my lad to-night?'

A great rattling of cow-chains from the shippen set her smiling.

'There's allus summat doing where he be,' she thought.

Then she went down, with John's little lamp in her hand, into the dark warm night, and stood within the shippen door.

'If so be you're tired of Rover and the cows,' she said with a touch of dignity, 'you're very kindly welcome — to bide wi' me.'



CHAPTER 21

THE hours flitted over the grey cottage and the shadowy hills — silent as the bats that hung at dawn from the beams of the shippen. Out of the east, from beyond the signpost, came day like an iridescent dove. Out of the west came storm like a hawk. Just at dawn the storm broke over the Chair and swooped across the valley, lashing the cottage.

‘Gi’ me a bit of comfort, Stephen,’ whispered Deborah.

‘Aren’t you happy, my little love?’

‘Aye. But them that’s happy wants comfort most. Them that’s got nought canna lose it.’

‘I know, Deb.’

It was his own intolerable nightmare now, this mist that might come across the flowery way at any moment, with its impalpable, inevitable ‘no more’.

‘Tired?’ he asked anxiously, as Joe had asked Lily. For to the comely and the awkward, the poet and the plodder, come the same unheralded majesty and frenzy, the same sweet backwash of tenderness and penitence. And Deborah replied as Lily had, as women in the primeval forest replied, with a weary, ecstatic, bewildering smile. Only her smile was to Lily’s what hill breezes are to the spent air of the plain.

‘And you have to go to work through this!’ she said later.

She was making him some tea. When he went away he turned up his collar and faced the storm joyously.

‘This evening,’ he called, ‘I’ll come and help in the telling.’

He squared his shoulders and tramped on, singing every song he knew, accompanied by a rush of wings that rose up before his coming and fled

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through the rain on either side with flapping and whirring and the long-drawn query of plovers.

He passed close to the Devil's Chair, entering the cloud that was round it, close and clammy. From near by a covey of grouse rose with their quacking laugh.

'Damn those birds!' he said, feeling hemmed in and pursued by something invisible.

He began to run, silent and shivering, down the northerly slope to Lostwithin.

At ten Mrs. Arden got home.

'Well, Deb!' she called, with her usual assumption that the world waited for her news with bated breath; 'both doing grand, and all over nicely afore the doctor came.'

She sat down beaming by the kitchen fire.

'Bless the girl! No more notice took than if I said "'tis raining!'" It's time, Deb Arden,' she sent her voice into the recesses of the back kitchen, 'it's high time you gave over thinking there's nought in the 'orld but flowers and birds and such. It's time you was serious like Joe's Lily, and saw as there's only three things as matters to a good 'ooman — the bride-bed, the child-bed, and the death-bed.'

Deborah went silently to her room and drew out from under her pillow a pearl ring. 'Pearls for tears,' she said. Then she stroked the pillow. She was one of the women who see on to the end of things, to whom the commonplace is transparent as glass — revealing the interior of life. She saw, with a vividness that would have surprised her mother, the philosophy of her last sentence. On her pillow she saw the shifting shadows of the future; round her little bed she heard the years rustle like falling leaves. It was no longer a mere part of her furniture; it was an apocalypse of love. The night just gone had set about it an immortal radiance for her. She shut her eyes and saw a day to come when a pillow should be pressed by a small head beside hers. She saw further — saw her own face quiet on the hard pillow of death.

'I be ready, Stephen,' she whispered; 'ready for all. I'll go with you gladsome in wet weather or in shiny; and lie quiet in the daisies knowing we loved true.'

'Deborah!' came Mrs. Arden's voice.

She went down.

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'What an old fire! It must have been alight hours, Deb. Whatever for?'

'I thought to set the bread to rise.'

'That's a good girl. Has it ris?'

'I forgot it after all, Mother.'

John came in, shaking the rain from his coat.

'There must have been a gad-fly in the shippen last night,' he said, 'for the mingicumumbus the cows have got the straw in is a disgrace to any cow.'

The day dragged on for Deborah, while her mother lay down in her room and John chopped wood outside. The rain was a steel wall between her and Stephen. Would he come this evening? Surely not, through this. Surely yes!

In the bleakness of absence one rapture filled her — she had done all she could for him. Nothing could take that away. She had loved him, given him of her best. So the ultimate bitterness of parting was not hers; she had the peace of those who know, when the beloved is gone, that they spent themselves and crumbled the stuff of their being for him while he was there.

All Stephen's sweet words, his stormy kisses, the pride of her womanhood in being desired so much by such a man — desired so that he forgot to consider her, she reflected triumphantly — these things were small beside the fact that she had made him happy. She had stood in the immortal company of those that have it in their power to give joy and do not miss their chance, crowning the beloved early with untarnished gold and morning flowers.

'What else matters?' she thought.





CHAPTER 22

THEY were sitting over tea in the fresh evening, when a shadow fell across the floor and Stephen stood on the threshold.

'Well, Stephen,' said John; 'a cup of tea?'

'I will, thanks, Mr. Arden, for I didn't wait for any after work.'

Mrs. Arden became conscious of 'summat in the air'. A man did not go without his tea for nothing.

Deborah looked imploringly at Stephen.

'You begin,' she said.

'Mr. and Mrs. Arden,' said Stephen impetuously, 'I've come to ask for Deborah. Only we don't want to be married, because —' the objection seemed rather foolish when John was looking at him so earnestly; he therefore emphasized it more — 'because I don't approve of it.'

'You bad, wicked, ne'er-do-weel of a fellow!' cried Mrs. Arden, in a rush of fury — 'to try and take my girl's good name off her!'

And she boxed his ears.

John, for all his trouble, smiled. Deborah was frozen with wrath and distress.

'Mother,' said John, 'be silent! Leave the lad to say his say. Now, Stephen.'

Stephen had remained commendably self-possessed, though flushed.

'Mr. Arden,' he said, 'though we shan't be married, I swear to you that it will be just the same.'

THE GOLDEN ARROW

John was gazing away through the window to the far distance beyond it, into things that are not of this world.

'I love her,' said Stephen impulsively, 'with my whole soul —'

John looked at him.

'And body —'

Mrs. Arden blinked interestedly.

'And I will love her till death.'

Deborah's eyes had never left him.

Feeling them all so focused on him, he was embarrassed. He clinched the matter.

'I love her better than myself,' he finished.

'Well, then, you're different from most of 'em,' Mrs. Arden burst out, 'or where'd the chillun be?'

Stephen frowned.

'Mother!' said John sternly, 'this is not a time for such talk. Deborah, what do you say to this?'

'I say as I love him and I'll follow him through the 'orld.'

'Not without a ring, Deb?' cried Mrs. Arden, horrified. 'A ring hallows all. Not without the ring and the bell and the register, Deborah! Not while I live!'

'Mother!' said John, in mild rebuke. 'Well, Deb?'

'Whatever Stephen do say.'

'And you'll give all for nought?' cried Mrs. Arden.

'He's chosen me out of the 'orld,' said Deborah, with pride. 'Nought else matters.'

Stephen looked at her. Mrs. Arden intercepted the look and at once became preternaturally silent.

'Father,' she said afterwards, 'it's no manner of use. She's his'n.'

'So long as we're all in all to each other, it's just the same,' said Stephen.

'So long,' John assented.

Stephen disliked his look of kindly pity more than Mrs. Arden's scolding.

'Marriage makes things no better, if you're sick of each other,' he continued.

'Never a bit.'

'Well, then, Mr. Arden —'

'But,' queried John, with his straight, keen glance, 'are you sure you're man enough to keep a woman safe, Stephen, my lad? It's a long road and a winding, and she'll be footsore, time and agen.'

John was thinking of the lambs he carried — four or five sometimes,

when they went long journeys — with their small, palpitating bodies and their pathetic eyes.

'Are you man enough to carry her, though you'm weary, Stephen, and tramp on, though all the powers of darkness be agen you, and s nile at her still, when you're nigh done yourself? Think, lad!'

'I am,' replied Stephen, without a moment's hesitation.

'Think what you could give up for her, Stephen.'

'Everything.'

'Health and happiness?'

'Yes — but there's no need.'

'Your longing after her?'

'Of course not. I love her too much.'

John smiled sadly.

'Your principles, Stephen?' He said it with a kind of forlorn hum our.

'Your principles about not marrying, eh?'

'No. I mean yes — if she asked it.'

'She never will,' said John. He turned to Deborah. 'Well, may God be with you and light your candle, Deborah, my child — this night and all.'

It almost seemed as if he fell back upon God to light it now that he could no longer do so himself. It was his silent comment upon Stephen.

'And when did you think of — going?' he asked Deborah.

She looked at Stephen.

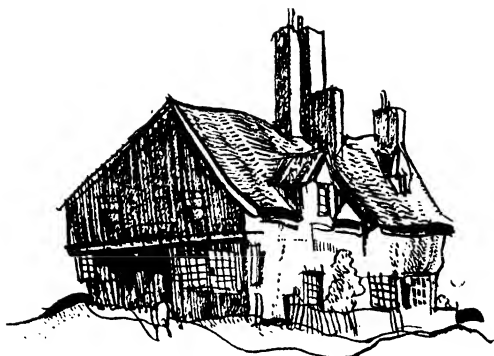
'I've got a cottage,' he said. 'The one by the Chair — there's no other empty. The landlord's begun the repairs to-day. He seemed pleased to let it — and surprised. It'll be ready next week, Deborah — when will you come?'

'When you come for me, Stephen.'

'Well,' Mrs. Arden broke out, tried beyond bearing; 'a more miserable business I never see! No jokes, no walking out, no asking in church, no best dress, no party, no wedding, no cooking till you'm all in a sweat, no nothing!' She threw her apron over her head, and cried loudly.

'And what poor Joe'll think, and what he'll say, and what he'll do, and what Lily'll say, and all their chillun, when they come (as they will, right as right, in spite of what I overheard unwilling and not eavesdropping at all), I'm sure I dunna know!' she cried in crescendo.

'What Joe and Joe's great-grandchildren will think,' said John, with a wry smile, 'is one of the great quantity of things that dunna matter, Mother.'



CHAPTER 23

STEPHEN slaved at the cottage, as Joe had slaved at his. He was in a frenzy of eagerness, tenderness. Beneath other emotions was the flame of desire which burns all obstacles from a young man's path and takes him and the woman he loves for its fuel — licking up in its course tears and pity and fulfilling the unseen purposes of God.

Deborah and Lily — different as they were — both looked for it in their lover's eyes; wept when they found it; treasured it beyond the joys in heaven. This kinship just at first was stronger even than Lily's sense of superiority and respectability. Though she had a good deal to say when Joe told her the news, when she saw Deborah she made a great effort and was silent. She had only been married a week, and she was still *primæval*, as a bride is once, a great woman always.

She and Joe had come up to tea on Sunday, the day before Deborah's departure.

'Well, Joe, lad!' said his mother; 'you'm twice the man you was.'

She looked at Lily with approval, seeing that the measure of Joe's well-being was also the measure of Lily's lassitude. She saw a new, minute line on Lily's forehead, and, as her manner was, to show her sympathy for Lily, she rated Joe.

'What's the good of standing there grinning like a turmit-lantern?' she cried, 'when you ought to be down on your bended knees, thanking me and Lily for making you what you are — not as you're much at the best of times!' she added, with intense pride in her eyes. 'You seem to think,' she continued, glad to find an outlet for her anger against the absent

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Stephen, 'you seem to think, as you stand there with your long, useless legs and your twelve stone six of do-naught, as you made the 'orld and all in it in seven days, like the Lord Almighty. Instead of which there you lay in that wold cradle, no bigger than the dolly in the tub, and if it hadna been for me, where'd you have beer? And now it's not enough but Lily must give up her days to feeding of you, and her nights of nice sleep as well. I'm ashamed of you, Joe Arden!'

'Well, Mother,' said Joe, with a slow smile, when the storm abated; 'it do sound awful, I know. I'm fair ashamed to be that sort of chap. But I didna make things how they be, and there it is.'

John came in with his brushing-hook and hedging-gloves.

'Goodness me, Mother, what a craking you do keep up!' he said; 'like a bird-frightener and a dozen of corn-crakes all at once. I could hear you in the far leasowes.'

Mrs. Arden was still indignant at his command of silence with regard to Deborah's concerns.

'If you listened to my craking a bit more than you do, John, it'd be better for us all,' she said. 'Lily, you go up and lie down awhile, and Deb 'll come and have a chat.'

Deborah and Lily gazed out of the window. There was a new freemasonry between them.

'Who's been dropping a tie-clip under your chessun drawers, Deborah?' asked Lily. 'Joe's got his'n. I'd put it away, if I was you.'

'I didna know it was there, Lil.'

'Where be all your pride now, Deb Arden, and your high and mighty ways to me about my bits of carrying on? But there—I won't go on at you. Can I lie on your bed? D'you mind how we knocked about, them nights last week, Deb? My! what a time ago! It's to-morrow you go, inna it?'

'Aye.'

'Make the most of to-night, then,' said Lily.

There was so much wistfulness mixed with Deborah's confusion that Lily heroically reserved all her criticism for a future time.

'Joe's in an awful taking about it,' she confided to Deborah. 'He says he'll give Stephen one for himself, when he sees him. I'd warn Stephen.'

'Oh, he won't be afeard.'

'Joe's awful strong.'

'I never did admire them lamp-post fellows.'

Mrs. Arden came in.

'Tea's ready,' she said, 'and Father and me want you to open your present, Deb.'

THE GOLDEN ARROW

Downstairs was a large box, containing a tea-set.

Beside it, with — 'From Father' — very firmly written on its white paper, was a large brass lamp with a rose-coloured shade.

Tea was a somewhat strained meal, Joe being sullen.

Finally he burst out —

'Well, Deb, I didna think you'd do such a thing. All the fellows are grinning behind my back — wish I met catch 'em at it. You needna bring the chap to *my* house.'

'Joe, Joe!' said his father; 'never cut love, lad!'

'You're welcome to bring him to *my* house, Deb,' said Lily.

Joe was much put out, and muttered, 'I shall have a few words to say to you, by and by.'

'You can say 'em and welcome!' Lily replied pertly, for it was a long time before they would go home, and she lived for the present. 'You can say 'em and welcome, so long's you dunna say 'em with your mouth full.'

'I'm glad you've met your match, Joe,' Mrs. Arden said, when the laughter subsided.

Joe good-humouredly passed his cup for more tea, for Lily's laughter rang little bells in his heart.

Deborah looked round them all wistfully. They seemed too small and bounded for her needs.

'Father, can I look the sheep along of you?' she asked.

'Surely you can, my dear.'

They went out into the cool colours of evening.

'There's a sheep gone astray over yonder,' Deborah said absently; 'hark at her crying.'

She was not thinking of the sheep, but of the ridge on the west, where Stephen was making ready for her.

'Aye, Deb,' said her father, answering her thought and not her words; 'he'll be putting a tuthree last touches now, no danger, so as to come for you bright and early.'

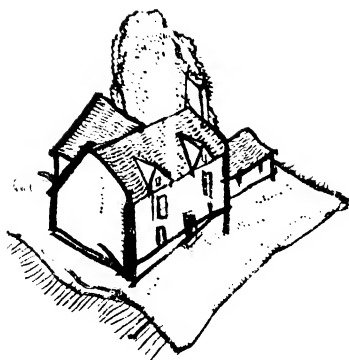
'Thank you kindly for the lamp, Father,' she said, 'and for all.'

'It's nought, it's nought, my dear.'

From the house Lily's voice rang out in 'The Golden Arrow', with Joe's bass, humming like a huge bee, and Mrs. Arden's cracked but enthusiastic treble.

Deborah and John looked at each other with the wordless glance that defies fate.

Above them in the invisible heather the top of the sign-post caught a last sun-ray.



CHAPTER 24

THERE was no room for grief in Deborah's heart next morning. The first mad gale of early autumn set the ponies galloping over the hill-tops; the sky was like a garden of lilies and delphiniums; she knew that Stephen was coming to her with long strides — coming to fetch her, to rule her days, to depend on her for his comforts, to kiss her again.

'Here he comes,' said John, who had been staring mournfully out of the window since he got up hours ago.

Stephen kicked the wicket open.

'A grand day, Mr. Arden! I say, may I call you Father now?'

'Aye, lad.'

Patty heard him.

'I'd liefer you called *me* by my marriage name, seeing as I'm no relation — not so much as mother-in-law — on account of stuff and nonsense in folks' brains, that stops 'em being married right and proper.' She nodded with *staccato* emphasis.

'Right you are!' said he affably.

'What about Deborah's things? Shall I bring them with Whitefoot?' John asked, wistfully aware that Stephen was now the first authority for the disposal of Deborah's things.

'Oh, I can carry them,' said Stephen, and shouldered the box.

'But you'll come with Whitefoot, and bring me the lamp and the tea-set, Father, wunna you?' said Deborah. 'To-night?'

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'Not to-night,' John answered, to Stephen's relief; 'may-happen to-morrow.'

'Come and send us, Father!' said Deborah.

'Just a few steps, then.'

At the last gate of his sheepwalk he stopped.

'Well, well — you'll be wanting to get along home and make her a dish of tea, Stephen.'

With this long-planned hint he turned homewards.

When he got in, Patty was rocking to and fro, wailing, with her apron over her head.

'Why, Mother, whatever's took you?'

'It's the chillun,' cried Mrs. Arden. 'I'd never gid 'em a thought before, poor mites. The chillun, the poor little things as'll be baseborn!' she sobbed.

'Mercy me, Mother! I never thought of that. I was so busy thinking of our Deb. What a fool I be!'

'You be, John.'

'What'll we do, Mother?'

'Do? Why, make him marry her, of course.'

'How?'

'A word here and a word there, and a good yammering time and agen, and Lil and Joe can say summat, and you can put in a word, solemn-like. And Eli!' She suddenly had an inspiration. 'Aye, Eli! Let Eli go along and mouth his old tex's — maybe they'll do some good for once.'

'But Stephen 'll be neither to hold nor to bind, and that'll vex Deb.'

'Well, and ain't that better than the other thing? The lot of a love-child inna roses.'

John pondered. He could not see his way at all clearly.

'Well,' he said at last, 'it's more in your line than mine, Mother. You'd best go about it as you think right and proper.'

'There's a sensible man!'

Stephen and Deborah went through the deep lanes, where the air was heavy with meadow-sweet, breast high in the ditches, curd-white, like garlands for an elfin bridal. In a little spinney Stephen paused.

'Come, I must kiss you.'

They lingered a long while.

At last she said, 'Shan't we be getting on, Stephen? I'm fair longing to see the cottage.'



N O R M A N H E P P L E . M D C C C C X L

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'Yes, yes! I can kiss you then as much as I like. Come on!'

He went so fast that she was almost running.

'Oh, stop, Stephen — please!'

'Come on!' he cried. 'I'll help you.'

He pulled her up the hill by her wrist till it ached; then flung his arm round her waist at the top, and ran down the slope.

She laughed.

'Oh, Stephen, you *be* hurryful!'

They came to the cottage, standing wide-eyed, facing the Devil's Chair. The dark paint over the upper windows was like raised eyebrows. Over the lower windows and the door he had painted a broad red band, barred with white — 'To liven it up,' he said. No other cottage was in sight.

Stephen set the box down. It had bruised his shoulder, but he was unaware of the fact.

'Now then, Deb! Here's the garden. I planted all those things. Here's the kitchen.'

'Eh, how nice!'

She wanted to examine everything, but he hurried on.

'Here's the parlour.'

'Oh, Stephen! How pretty! And is that your harmonium?'

'Yes — for you to learn to play. Come on — upstairs now. Here's our room.'

Deborah stood mute — so beautiful it seemed to her. The walls were pink; in the window stood a geranium; on the bed was a rose-patterned counterpane.

'And you've thought of it all and done it all in these few days — I canna think how!'

'No sleep!' he said, with satisfaction at the effect of his words.

'You mun sleep well to-night,' she said, in a maternal way.

'We, Deborah.'

'We.'

'This may as well be supper,' he said, as they sat at tea in the parlour. 'Gracious me, if she hasn't got that aggravating bow on again!'

He pulled it off.

'I be so untidy without it, Stephen.'

'Who cares?'

'Oh, Stephen — dunna pull my hair down! I did it so careful. Eh, dear! some one's sure to come.'

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'Never a soul!'

They pondered on that.

'Stephen!'

'Well?'

'I canna sit in the window like this.'

'You can if I say so.'

'I'm going to tidy me.'

'Right!' said Stephen unexpectedly

'And, Stephen —'

'What?'

'I'm so awful tired with the walk, and — last Sunday —'

'Well?'

'And I was wondering —'

'Well, what a time you take!'

'If you'd do summat for me, seeing as I came out to the shippen for you.'

'Out with it, then!'

Stephen spoke irritably. He was tired, excited, on fire and Deborah seemed so unimpassioned.

'Oh, I'll tell you after,' she said, surprised at her own temerity and suddenly terrified at the knowledge that her whole life was irremediably his.

'All right — go on then, and I'll lock up.'

'It's not but half-past seven yet! I was only going to tidy me.'

'Well, you needn't bother to.'

'But I want to wash up.'

'I don't.'

She was dismayed at his curtness. She heard him fastening the door.

'Locked in wi' love!' she whispered. Suddenly, in the midst of all her joy, she began to cry. She was very tired. She had been too excited to eat, and the parting with her father had worn her.

'What in hell's the matter now?' asked Stephen, coming in. He spoke with the entire lack of sentiment that passion brings.

'Oh, Stephen, I'm so tired.'

'So am I,' he said, seeing whither her pleading tended.

'I lost a lot of sleep last week.'

'So did I.'

'Oh, canna you see, Stephen?'

'See what?'

'What I'm asking.'

He flew into a rage.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'I suppose you want me to go out to the shippen again. A fine sort of bride you are! I love you a great deal too much to do anything of the kind.'

She accepted this without comment.

'Dunna hold me so tight, Stephen, please! I canna get my breath.'

'I can't help that.'

'Your arm's so hard.'

She had said this before; she tried to remember when. Suddenly it came to her, and with it came the vision of Stephen's face at the Fair, perfectly hard, his eyes looking into hers as they were now.

'I suppose he'll be sorry to-morrow,' she thought, 'and bring me flowers, like then.'

She gasped for breath.

'Oh, Stephen!'

He kissed her on the mouth, effectually stopping speech and breath. He took no notice of her pallor.

At last she fainted.

When she came round, he was bathing her face miserably, cursing himself under his breath. She smiled at him.

'Don't, Deb!'

'What?'

'Don't smile at me!'

He was inconsolable. He would not share the unthinkable black tea that he made her. He stormed at himself, tramping the room.

'I'm not fit — your father was right — I'm a brute.'

Now that his arm was not round her, Deborah forgot everything but pride that he loved her.

'I'd not have you different,' she said.

'Don't, Deb! I shall be the same again! I can't stay in. I'll go for a walk in the dark.'

'Dunna go!'

A flicker of laughter came into her eyes.

'Pick up my things, do!' she said.

Her hat, coat and bow, which he had flung on the floor, were reduced to a crushed and trampled ruin.

'I'll get you some more, Deb. I'll walk to Silverton and buy them. I won't get any baccy for six months, and then I shan't have wasted any money, he added, with ferocity towards himself. 'Now, Deb — finish your tea! Back soon.'

'Where be you going?'

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'I don't know.'

The old restlessness was in his voice.

'Bain't you tired?'

'No.'

'But, Stephen —'

She looked round the room.

'It be your room as well as mine.'

'I don't deserve to share it.'

'There — there!'

'I never listened to you.'

'Ne'er mind.'

A sound outside arrested them. It grew on the air like an incoming tide. It was under their window. He looked out.

'It's a lot of sheep,' he said, 'coming from by the Devil's Chair, running away from something. They've gone down the hill now, into the mist.'

'It's from the Chair as they're running. Folk say they're often like that.'

'What rot!'

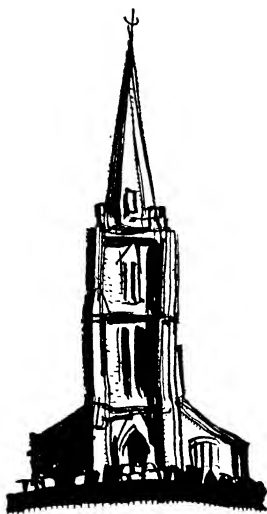
He had forgotten his penitence.

In the morning, Deborah was too tired to get up. Stephen had gone before she woke. She lay watching the Chair all day while he was at work. She looked at the white clouds drifting behind it, driven on to vague destinies. She thought of the sheep last night, driven by vague terror. She thought of herself — weary, beseeching the man she loved for rest and being unheard. She felt like the clouds — the sheep.

'Having no shepherd,' she murmured.

A picture rose before her of the white signpost and her father — very careful, very absorbed — carrying a newborn lamb and encouraging the mother to follow. She fell asleep and dreamt that it was Stephen and not her father who carried the lamb.

She awoke to hear Stephen calling her. He was in a quiet mood, feeling the reaction from yesterday. They strolled on the hill after tea in the clear blue air of a stainless evening. Afterwards she had her first lesson on the harmonium.



CHAPTER 25

'Now then! Work the pedals, pull out a stop, press the notes and then play.'

Deborah was in despair. She did not even know what stops were, and did not like to ask.

'Oh, there's some one at the door!' She got up with relief, and went to open it.

'Behold, I stand at the door and knock!' said Eli — quite unconscious of any blasphemy.

'It's Eli,' said Deborah, pale with fear.

'When you've enjoyed your new character as much as you want to,' sang out Stephen, in great spirits, 'walk in, old party!'

Eli came in.

'Thou art the man!' said he.

Stephen was amused.

'The woman has tempted thee,' he went on. 'Flee from this place!'

'Not much! Have some wedding cake?'

Stephen spoke with irritating pleasantness.

'I will neither eat bread nor drink wine until I have turned the hearts of this people.'

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'Your loss!' Stephen retorted.

Eli was annoyed. Religion was his hobby, and he was much in earnest about it. He was accustomed to see people quail before his utterances. Deborah did quail, as he was pleasurably aware. Not so Stephen.

He surveyed Stephen, half in and half out of the only easy chair, looking particularly lithe and pleasant in his working corduroys and blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His air of youth and well-being made Eli very wrathful. He detested youth.

He began to speak in a creaking, lugubrious tone.

Stephen lit a pipe.

'When them there bones o' yours be layin' in the soggin' wet ground —' Deborah moaned.

'You'd be the death of any religion,' Stephen remarked.

'And them two eyes with pennies on 'em —'

'Here, dry up!'

Stephen was angry.

'And nought but a poor, white skellington left —'

'Drop it!' shouted Stephen furiously.

Eli saw that he must change his course or go. He did not want to go yet.

'How is the faithful city become a harlot!' he cried. 'Deborah Arden, I proclaim you before this man, and will proclaim you in the parishes of Lostwithyn, Slepe and Bitterley, unless you get in my trap and come whome with me, weeping and gnashing your teeth —'

Stephen laughed. This enraged Eli.

'I will proclaim you,' he said, 'with your slow smile and your brazen ways and your body as is giv' to lust — I will proclaim you a whore.'

No sooner had he said the last word than his mouth was full of blood. Deborah caught Stephen's hand as it descended for the second time.

'Oh, no!' she cried; 'no, Stephen! He's an old man.'

Eli blinked malignly, standing his ground. He raised his hand.

'By Jehovah, in whom is justice and no mercy, I curse you both, root and branch, in your lying down and your rising up, and —'

His mouth was becoming extremely painful and was swelling.

'May you burn everlastingly! Whoso sinneth against the Lord —'

He spoke with one side of his mouth.

'Dunna laugh at him, Stephen!' Deborah whispered. 'It only makes him worse.'

'Whoso sinneth against the Lord, let him be utterly cast down!'

It did not occur to Eli that he might be sinning against Love himself.

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But Deborah, remembering it all afterwards, thought that he had been taken at his word.

'Here, I say, get out, you old gramophone!' cried Stephen, and he pushed Eli down the step.

Eli had never been so angry. He had never yet been laughed at. He stood up in the trap and hurled his Bible, which he had brought in order to read texts to the weeping couple (he had not a doubt that they would weep) straight at the window. The glass cracked from side to side.

'Oh, it's a token!' wailed Deborah.

Stephen flung himself at the gig, but Eli howled and flogged his horse, old Speedwell, until she broke into an unwilling gallop. He drove like a fiend — up hill, down hill, shouting texts, cursing, jerking at the reins and always flogging.

People stood at their doors and watched him, appalled.

He came through Slepe. Lily was leaning on the gate, and he lashed at her with his whip.

'Whose rick's afire?' Joe asked, coming to the door.

'It's father, drunk or crazy — lashed me across the face.'

'I'll round up no more blasted sheep for him,' said Joe.

Eli felt that every one was against him. There was his housekeeper — insisting on three good meals a day and beer. Beer! He was an abstainer himself; it was so economical. And she wouldn't get up before five or stay up after eleven. Six hours' sleep out of his day! And Lily sitting there as pert as could be! And that Deborah! When he thought of Stephen, he became a murderer in everything but fact. His mouth was hurting him abominably. The more it hurt, the more he lashed.

Speedwell shuddered so that the trap shook as she went up the last hill. When they reached the yard she fell down in the shafts.

'You've murdered your only friend!' said the housekeeper; 'aye, she's met her fatal.'

He came to himself. He reeled. Blood ran down his chin: he took no notice, but bent over the horse. They had gone to market together, to the fairs, to lug turnips, to carry hay, all Speedwell's life — and she was old. She had taken his curses as none else did, listened to his texts, pricked her ears when he declaimed his next Sunday's address on the way to town. The cattle and sheep, the dogs, came and went: Speedwell stayed. His wife died — well, no matter. She had been a great expense: Speedwell could exist in the poorest field. Lily left him — he was relieved. He did not like Lily — she was so young: Speedwell was old and ill-favoured. When people gave back his vituperations or would not listen to him, and

THE GOLDEN ARROW

he needed sympathy, he would say to himself, 'Me and Speed'll dunna hold with such ways.' When he had failed to think of a lacerating remark at the right moment, he made it to Speedwell, and felt that her 'roaring' was sympathetic. She was worth nothing, so he felt her to be a perrance on the farm. She was without any desire to amuse herself — this pleased him. All these things, gradually accumulating in his mind, had built up a regard for her, a unity of idea, a thing which stood in him for love — though others would have hardly called it so. And now she lay in a heap in the yard, and her eyes accused him. He ran for water, but he would not drink. With the generosity of the tragic moment which is so late, he brought out corn from the bin — corn that she had sniffed afar all her life and never had. She could not eat it.

'There!' said the housekeeper, with an eye to herself: 'That comes of starving folk; they get as they canna eat, not if it's ever so.'

"Oman!" shouted Eli in a terrific voice, 'fetch that there brandy as you keep in your bedroom and drink be stealth.'

But when the brandy came, he could not make Speedwell take any. She desired peace, and having done her long day's work, she took it. When Eli saw that nothing availed, he flung himself down beside her, and wept. The housekeeper was so terrified at this that she took her most valuable possession and ran for the nearest village, never looking back.

Eli tried to pray: but he had prayed for so many things that he did not want, that he felt prayer to be too offhand a thing for real need. He lay there in the dark, and the old mare slept away her last hours. A thought occurred to Eli. John was a great hand with animals; John might get her to take something. But no! — not John: he was so poor-spirited, and such a bad business man, and Eli had sneered so often at his kindness to animals. But then —? There was no vet, anywhere within ten miles. Speedwell groaned. He rose, hesitating no more, and began to run over the rough hill in the dark towards Upper Leasowes. His face was very swollen, and he felt giddy. He caught his feet continually in rabbit-holes. He clasped his head in both hands, because it ached, and ran on — a small, toiling figure in the vast night. Tears trickled down his cheeks; the sweat poured off him; he gasped for breath. At last he could run no more; he walked; then he crawled. Finally he reached John's in a state of collapse. All the time, back in the yard at Bitterley, Speedwell was dead.

He knocked.

'Whatever's the matter?' called Mrs. Arden. 'Is that you, Eli? Dunna come here at this time o' night with your texes and your hell-fire, for goodness' sake!'

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'John!' said Eli faintly.

In the croak John recognized the same cry that he heard in the lamb's bleat, the young bird's chirp. He had never heard it from Eli before. He went out.

'Speedwell!' gasped Eli, in a heap on the step. 'Her means dying. Come over and help us.'

John gave him an arm back over the hill, and — when they found all over — strove to comfort him. But he would not be comforted.

'Out of my sight!' he said. 'Leave me and my sin to the hand of the Lord, and let Him deal with me as He thinks well.'

He went in and shut the door.





CHAPTER 26

THE markets at Silvertown round about Lammas-tide are great days. Then you may see faces that you never see for the rest of the year — faces with quietness on them like a veil. To go into the market is to step back into multi-coloured antiquity with its system of the exchange of necessities, and the beauty of its common transactions.

Fruit from deep orchards by lost lanes, from the remote hills: flowers from gardens far from any high-road; treasures of the wild in generous baskets — all these are piled in artless confusion in the dim and dusty place.

The Saturday after Deborah's departure to Lostwithyn was the great wimberry market. The berries were brought in hampers that needed two men to lift them, and the purple juice dripped from them as in a vine-vat. Other fruit lay in huge masses of purple, gold and crimson. The air was full of its aroma. There were cheeses from dairies beside the great meres, that joined their waters across the fertile fields when the snows melted. There were white frilled mushrooms from pastures where the owl and the weasel lived undisturbed. These were gathered in the morning dusk,

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when dew made the fields like ponds, by barefooted young women with petticoats pinned above their knees — a practice that caused many a detour of young farm hands on the way to work. There were generous, roughly cut slabs of honeycomb from a strain of bees that were in these parts when Glendower came by. There were ducks with sage under their wings as a lady carries an umbrella. One stall was full of sprigged sun-bonnets, made after a pattern learnt in childhood by the old ladies that sold them.

These simple things, all recklessly cheap, gave to their sellers something of the large dignity of Nature herself — who gives in full measure out of unfailing storehouses. Beauty was everywhere, except in the meat market. There slow bluebottles, swollen and unwholesome, crawled and buzzed; men of a like complexion shouted stertorously, brandishing stained carving-knives; an unbearable stench arose from the offal, and women with pretty clothes and refined manners bought the guts of animals under such names as 'sweetbreads' or 'prime fat kidneys', and thrust their hands into the disembowelled bodies of rabbits to test their freshness.

John was taking some wool to the stapler and a calf to the auction. Joe had some bullocks to look at for Mr. Shakeshaft, and Lily had offered to sell wimberries for a neighbour in order to go to town. She pinned some honeysuckle in her dress, and tied a pink ribbon round her hat. She would have other admiration than Joe's to-day. Joe was nice, of course; but he was not eloquent. She sat between the two men, who bulged over the sides of the cart like half-grown swallows from their nest. When Joe swayed the others did too.

'You're crushing my dress, Joe.'

'Well, ain't that what it's for?' A large hand crept round her waist. She was busy making calculations about a lace collar she coveted. She must have it, but she had no money. They jogged on. The calf, looking in its sack like a baby in a head-wrapper, lifted its red and white face and gave a prolonged moo. Then, having made its protest against things in general, it nestled into the sack of wool and went to sleep.

'You met help me along with the calf, Joe, if Lil can manage the berries.'

Lily was delighted. She set out her goods with a consciousness that her hair was as bright as her bunch of yellow lilies.

The youths of Silverton were alive to their opportunities.

'Hullo, Gertie?' 'Morning, Miss!' they called. She sold all her flowers as buttonholes.

She still had the berries to sell.

'Bother Joe, being so long,' she thought, for she wanted a cup of tea.

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But Joe had not been long. He was standing just inside the door of the market, watching her with enormous pride — delighted to see her admired. When he heard her chaffing them, he slapped his leg delightfully, till a butcher, who was pounding steak, said —

‘If you *must* pun meat, pun mine!’

A wholesale fruit-dealer, with a roving eye for a pretty girl, and an hour to wait for his train, came up to Lily.

‘Five shilling for that lot and a kiss, miss — and a cup of tea thrown in.’

Lily wavered. To get rid of the wimberries and have a cup of tea was a pleasant prospect. ‘What’s a kiss?’ she thought.

‘A’ right,’ she replied.

They went to the People’s Dining Saloon close at hand. It had a long trestle table, where the market-folk sat with noses nearly touching, like parrots in a cage.

‘I must do some reckoning first,’ said Lily, who had begun to repent; she also wished to doctor the accounts before Joe appeared. She put the butter down at one shilling a pound, and took sixpence off the wimberries. This gave her enough to buy the collar. ‘Easy as easy!’ she thought.

They had tea and ham. The dealer was very pleasant. Lily felt that the kiss would really not be disagreeable. Only two diners were left, and they were counting out eggs.

‘Look here, missis!’ said the buyer, an old man with hair as stiff and long as a pony’s mane. ‘Look here — eleven a shilling’s my price. Now that’s over a penny each. Now I counts out twelve — see? Eleven for me and one for you. Now agen.’

The curious manner of his arithmetic confused the seller.

‘It’s all Welsh to me,’ she said. ‘I’ve got five young chillun and you’d ought to treat me fair.’

‘I *am* a-treating of you fair,’ said the ancient, and he began to count the eggs again. At each dozen he placed one in front of her.

‘But I don’t want any back, I want to sell ’em!’ she wailed.

‘So you can sell ’em when you’m got a dozen there — leastways, eleven!’ shouted the buyer, exasperated.

The dealer looked at them scornfully, and turned to Lily.

‘Now, for the reckoning, miss!’ he said, and took his kiss.

Lily’s horrified eyes beheld Joe’s face flattened rosily against the plate-glass door, with its superannuated legend — somewhat disconcerting on this broiling day —

‘Christmas Puddings piping hot.’

Lily was piping hot.

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Joe came in.

'Seems to me,' he said, 'as there's a little fellow here that'd be better not here.'

'How should I know this little lot was yours?' said the dealer.

'Come on out of this, Lily!' commanded Joe.

John sitting at his stall, with his blue gaze and white hair and a bunch of delphinium, selling Patty's butter, saw them go and was concerned.

'The lad's looking mighty set,' he cogitated.

'Well, well — I munna meddle.' Watching his patient face, full of a love that had to control its generosity, it was possible to believe in a Divinity who stood aside from the world's madness not from indifference, but for some great end.

Joe and Lily sat by the river in a deserted corner.

'Now, then!' said Joe.

'Wunna you kiss me, Joe?'

'No. Not till I've got to the bottom of this business,' Joe replied, with a new-found wisdom. 'Besides, I've got no tea to give you for it.'

Lily began to cry.

'Best begin,' said Joe. 'Here we stop till you do, if it's all night.'

She knew that he would. She was in despair.

It seemed so bad, and was so slight.

'It was them wimberries.'

'Eh?'

'He bought 'em off me.'

'Oh.'

'Only if I'd kiss him. And he threw in a cup o' tea. It inna my fault if I'm pretty,' she added petulantly.

Joe looked at her thoughtfully.

'It be,' he said, with perspicacity. 'I dunno how it is, Lil, but you make your clothes look, when you've got 'em on, like them women in the papers — ondecnt. Now, our Deb never does. And,' he added with decision, 'if you want to look ondecnt, you can look it at whome — to me.'

The prospect caused a relenting expression which Lily saw.

'I sold the things pretty well,' she remarked.

She was rather dismayed when he asked the prices.

'The butter was too cheap,' said Joe.

'It's gone down.'

The interview was over. She bought the collar while Joe went to see

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if his father was ready. They drove home in great content, and all clouds seemed to have blown away. Lily registered a black mark against Deborah for the propriety of her dress.

When they got home, she rushed upstairs to try on the collar, leaving the paper on the table. Joe picked it up.

'I thought you'd no money?' he called. 'Where's this from?'

He frowned as the explanation dawned on him.

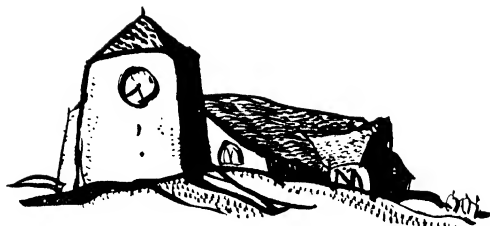
'You lied about that butter,' he said, ascending the stairs. 'The second mean thing to-day. You're different to Deb. Look here — next time you want money as bad as that, ask for it.'

His voice rose.

'And I'll not have strange fellows paying for the tea and ham of the woman I sleep with.'

'Oh, Joe, if I'd allus lived along of a fine chap like you,' sobbed Lily, with great *savoir faire*, 'and not along of a stingy monkey, I'd be different.'

A second black mark went down against Deborah; another little tip was given to her destiny.



CHAPTER 27

'DEB!' said Stephen, waking her at four on Monday morning, 'it's an A1 day. Up you get! We'll go and see the sun rise from the old chap's chair.'

'It's mortal early,' said Deborah. She felt selfish to dash his pleasure, but she had only had two hours' sleep.

'You *are* lazy,' he laughed. 'Why, if I was a ploughman like Joe, you'd have to get up at this time every day. You *do* make a fuss.'

He felt particularly well himself; he could not understand her lassitude, and it irritated him. By the irony of things Lily, who had given herself meanly from mean motives, was considered by Joe, regarded as respectable by the neighbours, and admired by herself. Deborah had given in large measure, like the land of great hills and wide pastures whose child she was; and she had none of Lily's privileges.

'Couldna I just have one more nap, Stephen, and you go on without me?'

'No, it's getting light, and we shall miss the best of it if we're not quick.'

He looked at her long, soft hair, her clear face, and his mood suddenly changed. 'We're too late now, in fact.'

His arm slipped round her.

'I'll be very quick,' she said hurriedly.

'So you're even ready to get up to avoid me.'

'Oh, dunna say that, Stephen!'

He was really hurt as well as offended. He was so entirely unable to control his new-found capacities for emotion (kept under until a month ago, and never trained or pruned) that he rushed at things like a calf just turned out in a field — hurting himself, indignant, all afire to grasp every joy. Because so many normal joys had been denied him he was all the

more voracious for pleasure. He had cultivated so many principles, quoted so many texts, preached so fervently, lived in such a grey atmosphere — all without real conviction; and now that, in his extraordinary renaissance, the body and not the soul awoke first, he was like a drunkard. Had he loved Deborah with all his being they would have been safe. But he loved in the manner of many civilized people, and not in Deborah's way — for she was primæval, and her realities had never been sponged away. His had. He regarded her as his best possession, but the idea of sharing every thought, every hour's work with her would have made him laugh. Joe would have laughed too, but he had the virtues of his narrow view of life; Stephen had not. He had in fact, no definite ethic of his own as yet. He had not had time to think it out since he threw the ready-made code away. Deborah's love was the sweetest flowering of which humanity is capable, because it was primitive and spiritual. To give — to be with her man — to be so utterly at one that no explanation was ever necessary — to work, laugh, sleep and watch the splendid seasons together, being in other things than sex free and equal, and in sex so mutually generous as to forget self and rights — such was Deborah's idea of love. This idea, though vague, made her feel glorified and not lowered by giving herself to a lover.

Her eyes were full of tears.

'How can 'ee say such things, Stephen?'

Anger awoke in her. She had given him her independence — and she had been strong in her self-reliance as a mountain fox. She had given him her flawless health, her day-long tramps over the hills, the solitary hours, dear to her as to her father. She had given him — more than all — the sense of right, respectability, which is deeper in her type of character than in any.

Her dignity flamed into words that stung him to fury.

'You love an 'ooman like a lad loves cake — till there inna nought left. And you think of Stephen Southernwood a deal more than's good for you.'

He had enough greatness to see the truth in the words, not enough to own it. He shook her.

'It's time you learnt that you're my woman and not my great-grand-mother!' he said.

He would have been funny if he had not been so grievously mistaken.

'You're mine, d'you hear? It's not for you to criticize my way of love.'

'I'm no more yours than you're mine.'

'Yes, you are.'

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'Not if we're lovers as well as man and woman. Stephen, shall we go and see the sun rise now?'

'No. I've changed my mind.'

'Oh, Stephen! Canna you be like it says in that nice hymn — lover of my soul? Just this morning? You've been the other kind of lover all the while —'

'Would you like it if I wasn't?'

'No, only I wanted the other as well.'

'You shouldn't have taken up with an ordinary chap like me.'

'You bain't ordinary, Stephen.'

'Yes, I am, thank the Lord! I suppose you're sorry you took up with me now?'

'Oh, Stephen, you know I love only you in the 'orld. Only I want —'

She hesitated, unable to find words to express the fact that although, like most women, she was fascinated by virility, curbed virility claimed her wholehearted adoration.

'If you love me, you must want what I choose, and when I choose,' said Stephen shortly.

He reached the mine late, with shame in his heart.

'Damn you, Southernwood!' snapped the manager.

'Damn *you*!' said Stephen.

'A month's notice!' said the manager.

But at the end of the day the aggregate of work that Stephen's bad temper had produced was so large that the manager shouted after his departing figure —

'You can stop on.'

After Stephen had gone, Deborah walked slowly to the hill-top, and sat watching the distant signpost — like a white pin in a large purple cushion. Below, in the plain and in the valley where Slepe lay, corn was being cut and bound in stooks. Little figures moved about, far down, and the reaper passed across the field with no sound. The hills lay under the noon sun like ripe plums in a huge basket.

From the yard at the spar mine came weird, plaintive sounds, as the rock-crusher ground the body of the mountain to fragments. These sounds were so wild and eerie that they might have been the forlorn music of fairy players sitting, shadowy and huge, in the dim rock-foundations, fiddling madly of nameless terror, fluting of unreachable beauties and rocky immortalities, harping on their own heartstrings to the deaf ears of men. Deborah listened and thought of Stephen down there, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, his nostrils a little expanded with excitement in the

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giant work he controlled, his nod bringing a fresh trolleyful of rock to be ground up.

Suddenly he seemed to her like the rock-crusher, but with no regulating hand. Hers must be the regulating hand — yet she felt only like the crushed rock. The music rose; Stephen was working like a demon to-day, and the men cursed as they sweated. The mountain, a thing beautiful with such majestic and static beauty as only a lover or genius can reach, lifted its voice in a passionless death-song.

Deborah attained the beauty of the summits. She sat down on a rock at the foot of the Chair, and gazed towards the mine.

'He'm eager,' she pondered, 'and he canna stop to think of me no more than the rock. He chose me out of the 'orld.' She smiled. 'It inna his fault as he'm eager. So long as he'm for me and me for him, nought matters, and I dunna complain.' She looked around the reaped country, the gashed hillside, and spoke aloud as if Stephen were with her.

'So long as there's aught left of me, Stephen, you met crumple me — if you've a mind to.'

The sound of the rock-crusher rose again on the still air.

'Only never leave me, Stephen!' she cried, and a great terror came on her, so that she clung to the rock till it hurt her hands.

'Don't let it be for nought, lad — don't 'ee!'

The music died.

She remembered that Stephen would be coming home for his dinner — and there was no dinner ready. She ran down the slope. The cranberry flowers, open now, showed more like tears than ever on the scarred face of the rock.

The fire was out, the sticks wet. She had not yet coaxed it to burn, when she heard his step.

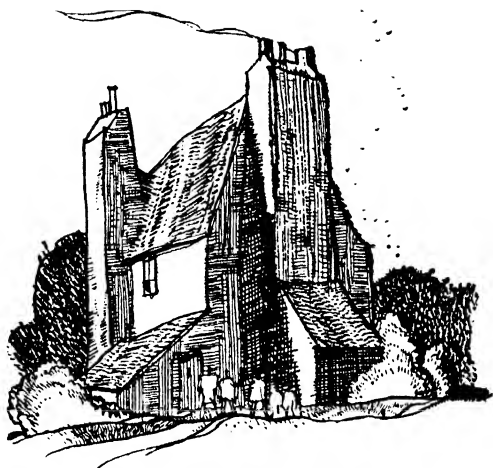
'Oh, Stephen!' she cried in a panic; 'you'll be right vexed — I hanna got your dinner ready.'

He stood on the threshold and looked across at her, as she poured paraffin on the coal. He had run up the hill without his coat or waistcoat, and was clammy with sweat, tired, hungry, and ruffled by the sullenness of the men. Deborah thought the look in his eyes was one of anger, and she sat down on the salt-box and began to cry.

Stephen crossed the room and knelt down by her, resting his head against her shoulder. He said nothing whatever. It was the second purely noble moment of his life — the second outward sign of the possibilities that John had seen. He made no apologies, no effort to be picturesque, no

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attempt at self-justification. He forgot his hunger, the men, his tiredness. He forgot self. Without a word they remained so until the clock struck two, and the dinner hour was over. He went out, giving her a long look and still having forgone the luxury of words. Many such moments, and Stephen would belong to the small company of men who hold the world back from the beast — the self-givers, the lovers, in whom the flesh and the spirit burn together with a steadfast flame, and light the earth. But he had so much to unlearn, to give up, to suffer. He was like the mass of stone that is to be a great statue, and how long the statue would be in the making none could say.



CHAPTER 2

WHEN Stephen came back to tea, Deborah had the place glowing with comfort. In the afternoon she had done a day's work; only so could she express her joy. After tea she sat on his knee like a happy child. He told her tales about his work; he wanted the reassurance of her laughter. She looked up at him in the fading light.

‘Poor Lily!’ she murmured; ‘with only our Joe.’

His mouth twitched.

‘Don’t, Deb!’ he said. ‘Joe’s a decent chap. But I’m on the mend.’ He laughed rather unsteadily. ‘Come to our room a minute — I’ve something to show you, Deb.’

On the floor were a blanket and pillow.

‘Good enough for me,’ he said.

‘But, Stephen —’

He was immovable. He slept on the floor for three nights, caught a bad cold and still kept on. He sang with a new joy as he went to work, though he was tired from the unaccustomed hardness of his bed. Deborah acquiesced, as she always did when he was what she called ‘set’. Her pride in him strengthened when she peered over the rosy counterpane and saw him restlessly asleep there with his greatcoat for a blanket.

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At the mine he continued to work feverishly.

'Well, if he do sweat us, he sweats himself first,' said the men. They liked him in spite of his hastiness and the tales they heard of his religious and moral shortcomings.

If other lives could have been hindered from impinging on those of Deborah and Stephen, they might have worked out their destinies in the swift way of great lovers. But Mrs. Arden with her definite morality, Joe with his obstinate and straitened view of sex, Eli with his ranting dogmatism, Lily with her petty spite, and the world in general with its terror of nonconformity — all these came round them as steadily as the tide round a promontory, and (some of them with the best intentions) brought about tragedy. The only person to utter no word was John, for he had no moral code. Those that dwell in the lands of the sun do not need fires.

'Thou shalt not' was mere foolishness to John, who was always so occupied in loving — the great affirmative — that he had no time for such negations.

When he came on Tuesday, he looked at Stephen in his long, earnest way, and when they wandered round the garden together while Deborah was busy in the kitchen, he patted him on the shoulder.

'Deb looks fine,' he said.

Stephen walked on for a space. Then he replied —

'I'm doing my best — now.'

'Aye.'

'I didn't — at first.'

'No.'

'How d'you know?'

'The lamp's not been alight in your face all that long, lad.'

Stephen was embarrassed. He edged away from the subject.

'Like to see over the house, Father?'

They were upstairs before Stephen remembered the blanket and pillow on the floor. John saw them. He had the mystic's complete grasp, on necessary occasion, of the commonplaces, the vitalities, the realities of life. To say nothing would have been to create a tacit understanding that something was wrong. He looked out at the day, full of cool colours.

'I shouldna wonder,' he remarked, 'if we had the first bit of frost to-night. I dunna know as there's anything so bad to bear as a frost in August when the country's all full of lusty life. I see you'm a bit of a self-chastiser, lad.'

He smiled as he had not yet smiled at Stephen.

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'And I don't think the worse of you for it, nor —' he looked at him with kindly understanding — 'nor for the cause.'

'You two men, come on!' called Deborah. She was so happy to see affection springing up between her father and Stephen that she had made enough toast for a choir tea.

'If you dunna eat it every bit,' she said, with a tyrannical nod and a radiant look at Stephen, 'I met cry — so there!'

'I wouldn't have that for anything,' said Stephen, coming round to her chair and remembering with shame how she had cried on Monday morning. There was a pause, during which John was ostentatiously interested in Deborah's sewing-machine.

'Oh, dear-a-me!' he said after an interval, 'I've broken your machine seemingly.'

He held up the handle with a guilty expression. Since he hated machinery as Eli hated youth, Deborah and Stephen laughed.

'I'll put it on in a jiffy,' cried Stephen. 'Look — you just turn this crank —'

But John was not as interested in the crank as in Stephen and Deborah.

'I wish,' he said, just before he ambled off on Whitefoot, 'that you could come along some evening and lend Joe and me a hand with Eli's sheep, Stephen. You can ride, I dare say?'

'A bit.'

'I was thinking it'd be in your line. How you ever come to be doing the preaching in black coat and weskit beats me,' said John amusedly.

'I've had enough of it; you can't stick at things for ever.'

The restless look came into Stephen's eyes.

'Why are you going to see after Eli's sheep, Father?' asked Deborah.

'Well, since the owd mare died, he's good for nought, poor chap. He sits in the house like an owl in a tree, and when I go in, he says, "The Lord's dealing with me. Take your silly face outside, 'oot!" And, of course, the animals and that must be seen after, so I thought to myself, if Joe'd borrow a horse and you'd ride Whitefoot, we'd soon round up the sheep.'

'Which day?' asked Stephen, wondering how much speed could be got out of the venerable Whitefoot.

'To-morrow?'

'Right.'

'You and Lily mun come along, Deb, and Mother'll bring tea, and we'll have a bit of a randy.'

He rubbed his hands. To do a kindness and make several people happy as well, was his idea of bliss.



CHAPTER 29

'I dunna care to have much to do with Stephen,' said Joe sulkily, when John called at Slepe. 'And I told Eli as I wouldna round up any more of his blasted sheep.'

John looked at him.

'But still,' Joe amended gruffly, rather disconcerted by the look, 'sin' you want me to, I'll come this once.'

'That's a good lad. And Lil?'

'Well, of course, I dunna hold with Deb's ways,' Lily remarked, with her nose in the air, 'but still —' she thought of Stephen, whose admiration she coveted because it was withheld — 'still, as it's my own father you'm giving a hand to, it's my duty to come.'

'Duty's a word I've no use for. But if you'll come that's all right.'

On Wednesday evening, Eli, sitting far back in the dreary kitchen, presumably being 'dealt with', blinked with surprise at seeing a merry party come over Bitterley Hill.

'Three baskets, John, two wold horses, my darter, that gomeril Joe, John's old 'ooman (a bad 'ooman that — a sharp-tongued 'ooman), and that blasted Stephen,' he ruminated. 'Now, what'n they after? My apples?'

His one tree of wizened cider-apples would hardly have justified a raid. He watched every movement, his head moving backwards and forwards like a cat watching a fly-catcher.

'They'm making them some tay. What the land's coming to I dunna know — the way folks drag their victuals out o' doors, like a cat drags meat off a plate, and chaws 'em along with the beasts that perish. I'd like



NORMAN HEPPLE

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to throw another Bible at that Stephen — wish it met grind him to powder according to the good and gracious promise.'

'Now then, you young chaps!' said John, when tea was over, 'let's see what you can do with them ship.'

'Be very careful, won't 'ee, Stephen?' Deborah implored.

'Rather!' He dug his heels into the astonished Whitefoot and was off, shouting like a madman. He and Joe galloped over the hill, round the hill, up sheep-tracks, over heather, whistling, shouting — Stephen lithe, Joe dogged — both enjoying themselves mightily. They forgot their dislike of each other in the comradeship of physical effort.

'Fetch up that owd ewe with the cough, 'oot, Stephen?' sang out Joe, and Stephen was off down a slope nearly as steep as a roof. He was palpably the best rider. This annoyed Lily, especially as he had not given her a single look of admiration. Also there were the black marks registered against Deborah on Saturday.

'Dunna he look a handsome chap?' asked Deborah, with clasped hands.

'Handsome is as handsome does. I'm fair surprised at you and him living in 'sin,' replied Lily. 'The Slepe folks say there'll be a curse on you, and they dunna care to have much to do with you.'

'They needna.' Deborah spoke with outer calm and inner misery.

'And,' said Lily, annoyed by the calm, 'if we have children, I shan't care for them to 'sociate with yours, cos yours'll be baseborn.'

Mrs. Arden, who had been absorbed in pride of Joe's horsemanship, was brought back to the spot by the last word and by Deborah's low wail.

'Lily,' she said, with her extraordinary acuteness for the adversary's weak point, 'it's early to talk of your chillun yet, afore even the morning sickness has begun! There, Deb, dunna take on. He'll marry you if you ask him, right enough. Do it for the little 'uns' sake, as may come.'

'Ki-i-i-i!' yelled Stephen in the distance, galloping to and fro. Deborah thought what the sons of a man like Stephen would be.

'Eh, what lads!' she said to herself, with radiant eyes. 'They shanna be shouted after by Lily's brats.'

She determined that, if she could, she would sacrifice Stephen's views to these bright, wonderful visions that glanced at her out of the future with his eyes.

John was counting the sheep, standing in the pen of iron hurdles with the woolly bodies round him, saying, 'There, there!' when they came in panting after a long and nimble chase.

'Only two short now,' he said.

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A raucous voice was uplifted.

'Get off my land, Joe Arden, and you, Southern'ood! I'll summons you for trespass, breaking fences, sheep-worrying, sheep-stealing and cruelty to animals. And' (he glanced balefully at Stephen) 'I'll summons you for stealing my Bible. Oh! you met laugh, you back-sliding and perverse generation, you met laugh! But the Lord'll deal with you, as He's dealing with me, one of these fine days, and you wunna like it. Not as I mind,' he added hastily, 'for I am with Him as His own familiar friend, and what I did is betwixt me and Him; but you wunna like it, you young rascal lion with your kept 'ooman.'

'Get into your hole!' said Stephen, 'or I'll twist your neck.'

'Man, man!' John interposed, 'we'm getting in your sheep for you. You're in the situation of one as is receiving a favour,' he added in amused explanation.

'I'm in the situation of wanting my farm and my pasture and my flocks and my herds to myself.'

And Eli undid the hurdles, letting all the sheep out.

'I'll be blowed!' said Joe.

'Well, well, Eli! I thought to see to their feet and look over 'em thorough for you — but as you will.' John was somewhat nettled. 'I thought they'd get straying,' he added.

'I like 'em to stray.'

'And get fut-rot.'

'I like 'em to get fut-rot.'

'And they met die, if they wunna seen to.'

'I like 'em to die.'

He stood there, a ridiculous, squat old figure, and John could have wept for him. Joe and Stephen only saw the humour of it. They lay on the horses' necks and roared, helpless, Joe slapping his leg at intervals and Stephen imploring him not to.

'It sets me off again, you fool!' he cried. 'Look at the sheep!'

They were sedately returning whither they had been brought with so much labour; even John was obliged to laugh at the prim jauntiness of their departure.

'Now,' said Eli, 'you've had your bloody picnic. Get off my land!'

He went back into the house and slammed the door.

'If I was you, Steve,' advised Joe, still comradely, on the way home, 'I'd put soft ideas in me pocket, and get married. It inna partic'lar pleasant to have Deb called a kept 'ooman.'

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'Oh, shut up!' said Stephen. But he pondered on it.

'What puzzles me,' continued Joe, whose strong point was not tact, 'is you doing such a thing when you're a preacher.'

'I've given all that up ages ago — a fortnight ago,' Stephen replied.

'You're a bit of a quick-change artist, bain't you, Stephen?'

'Well, if I wasn't, life's so short that I should never get anywhere. I suppose you don't want to, though!'

'Not partic'lar.'

'Well, I do.'



CHAPTER 30

ON the next Monday Deborah inaugurated her first washing-day. Stephen fixed a line for her between two of the dead trees in the garden hedge.

'I'd liefer they came down, Stephen,' she demurred.

She found the views of them from the east — against the sunset sky, and from the west — against the Devil's Chair, equally depressing.

They seemed, with their boughs and trunks like bleached bones — their loss of the elasticity of life — their cant away from the Chair, to speak of some terrific happening up there. So did the desolate acres of burnt heather, each bush charred and left as a skeleton above the black-strewn ground. There had been a great summer fire here, years ago; the dry heather had been heated to a smouldering glow; a spark had leapt up; the hill-top had been wrapped in flame.

There were some that scouted this explanation, and spoke of voices — wordless shouts — the sound of feet that passed and came again in the stillness of an August noon. They said that the Chair shook in the heat-haze and a tongue of flame leapt from it like a flung torch.

Stephen laughed when Deborah told him this; but it made him dislike the charred slopes and the trees.

'I'll have 'em down when it's cooler,' he reassured her; 'they'll make good fuel.'

He came home to-day before Deborah had finished bringing in the clothes. She was taking them from the line, rosy and full of energy. He

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went and helped her. He thought as he watched her gracious figure, with the white apron flying in the breeze, its bib sweetly rounded, that such necessary work gave a woman beauty.

'Isn't it soft, Deb, the way people think a bit of work's a disgrace?' he said.

'It's only poor feckless things that think it, surely. There's nought like work for health, and good health's the flower, inna it, Stephen?'

'Yes. Enjoyed your wash?'

'Aye, the first since we were —'

She was going to say 'wed'.

The emotions of the past few days rushed to her lips.

'Eh, Stephen! Couldna you bring yourself to it?'

'What?'

'Wedding me.'

'I don't know.'

'You met put notions — not as I'm saying aught agen *your* notions — second.'

'Second to what?'

She could not bring herself to speak of those visionary boys. She must wait, she thought, until they were 'quiet like'.

She felt that they must be comrades, in some mood of calm communion, before she would have courage for that. To-day he was too purely masculine: his eyes too openly acclaimed her a fair woman.

'Second to me,' she said. But she had never thought less of herself.

'Who's been nasty to you?'

'Lily.'

'Damn Lily.'

'But everybody's the same. No one's been to see us.'

'Good thing too.'

'Only — well, Mother's the same.'

'H'm.'

'And Joe.'

'Joe! what's he matter?'

'Stephen, would you mislike it all that much?'

'Yes. I hate to be tied.'

'But we're bound faster then books and rings can tie us. It'd be no different to us. I'm yours now, for certain sure.'

Before the sudden flame of masterful joy that her words woke in his eyes she looked down.

'Mine! I don't need an old fool's mumbling to get the woman I want

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— nor to keep her. Besides, I hate to give in. They'd think it was their doing.'

'But it won't be. It'll be me.'

He was in the mood to listen to her — a peculiar, uplifted mood of which he was capable — a state known to people of a certain calibre, such as the saint in his long fasts, the genius in his timeless agonies of desire for unattainable beauty. Stephen had been stern with himself during the past week, and had suffered in proportion to his capacity for joy — which was extraordinary. He was full of a white exaltation, and was ready — if the truth must out — for the next downward plunge.

'We'll talk about it tonight,' he said.

'Be you —'

'Well?'

'I took that old rug away. The week's up, Stephen.'

In his gratitude to her for so easily forgiving him, his young delight at the ending of his self-imposed hardship and his intensified passion for her, he whispered just before they fell asleep —

'Will you marry me, Deborah Arden?'

'Aye, Stephen,' she murmured in a glow of happiness; 'and thank you kindly, lad.'

Outside, the Chair reared itself haughtily above the cowering land. Around it, as the August night drove on, and the mists stood in the plain to the tops of twenty-foot hedges like water in deep bowls, rose and moved in silence impalpable tenebræ. They swept round it as if in a dark incantation, with beckoning arms and stealthy haste, passing across the dim waste of burnt heather in the lost eddies.

Deborah woke in a panic, dreaming of Stephen's face distorted with anger as he flung a snapped wedding-ring at her feet. He was sleeping with his hand under his cheek, his hair fluffy and damp, and an air of boyishness mingling with traces of passion on his face — a look that arouses in a woman a storm of love, feminine, wifely, maternal.

She kissed him softly. Her evil dream had fled.

'Hullo, Deb!' He stretched with a vigorous enjoyment that made what she called 'a puzzle-garden' of the bedclothes.

'When am I to go and get that gold ring, Deb?'

He had not changed his mind, then. She rejoiced. It was summer in the land as yet; the year had not spent all her maiden glory. Still there was gold in the fields — purple on the hills. The apples flamed in little orchards.

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Deborah's cheek fired with delight and content of the future. It never occurred to her that it is not the generous, splendid moment that wears on a nature like Stephen's, but the long, featureless months with no special credit or romance. She did not know that the only thing that could hold such a man when he was young and crude was the sense that nothing held him except his own will; for restraint drives such natures mad, and they will be over every fence. She did not know the restlessness of his nature, the underlying melancholy that might spring out at any moment when the glory was off the hills and gone from the fields, when the largesse of the year had been given and the hardness of winter had come. Then, when the bloom was gone from his first passion for her, and she had given all she could, it would be her turn to dip into the wells of his being for comfort and tenderness.

She did not know that under his new-found materialism lurked a superstition more powerful than hers, because unplumbed by him. This was partially the outcome of the dark doctrines he had been taught as a child; it was partly inherited from a race that had come of the soil, as Deborah's had; it was also the primæval instinct of the poet and the savage, who find in rock and flower a fearful alphabet. He had no idea that this existed in him, and he had not the conscious poet's safety-valve of expression.

It was impossible to say what would happen if this superstition awoke before his mind had worked out its views of time and eternity and his physical passion grown to calm maturity.

Already, when the wind mewed in the chimney like a great cat, and the early autumn storms trod the hill like crazy giants, and the ebb-tide of colour set in while evenings darkened, he would feel an unpleasant sense of vacancy and eeriness. At these times he felt a faint home-sickness for lighted towns — a momentary irritability. It was so fleeting that Deborah did not notice it. She herself rejoiced in thinking of the long warm evenings when they would hear the storm howling, and smile at each other in the cosy lamp-light — shut in from all storm, all cold.

'When'll those may-trees on the slopes get their leaves again, Deb? They're nearly off,' he said sadly; 'I want to see them in flower.'

'It met be June,' said Deborah; 'the thorn blows late hereabouts.'



CHAPTER 3 I

ON Deborah's wedding day the wind raged over the vast, rolling plain in the west — a plain utterly different from that on the other side of the two ridges, which was flat except for a few round hills between the rose-coloured turnip-fields and the diaper of stubble and grass. But the smallest hills to the west would have been striking features in an ordinary countryside; the valleys were chasms, the flattest lands a switchback. It stretched away, broken by sudden mountainous masses, like a stormy green sea, where the ridges were breakers and the woods black froth. In the centre of the semicircular horizon, blue with distance, fronting the Devil's Chair like the throne of a rival potentate, was Cader Idris; on either side lay mountains like cones, like clenched fists, like recumbent goddesses and crouching beasts. Above was a grey and white welter of shredded cloud, massed here and there like fleeces of giant sheep, but mostly strewn like dove coloured and lavender feathers till the sky looked like the eyrie of a bird of prey.

Below Stephen's cottage, and much farther from the menace of the Chair, the hamlet of Lostwithyn clung to the slope of the hill with frenzied tenacity; the cottages looked like small stones taking part in a huge landslip.

Stephen and Deborah walked along the hill-top, where black rocks were piled in grotesque heaps, as though for a rockery in the gardens of the ancient gods. On nearly every rock were carved by the chisels of the seasons faces like gargoyles, heads of beasts, profiles distorted as if with unthinkable agony. They passed these and went across the hill to the top

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of the first gorge to gather foxgloves for Mrs. Arden. The hill was gashed for nearly its whole height, and a tide of foxgloves rolled sheer from top to bottom like arterial blood.

In the intervals of hot sunshine masses of purple shadow, acres wide, raced across the country. The wind raved, plucked at Deborah's hair and dress, tore at her arm which was linked in Stephen's.

'Hold me tight, 'oot, Stephen!' she cried, standing with her white dress wrapped tightly round her by the wind.

He thought her adorable.

'I will that!' he replied. 'Now and always.'

He held her so closely that she could scarcely breathe. They picked the foxgloves — a strange, elfish bouquet for a bride, with their gaping mouths and spotted lips and the queer nodding of the shut buds.

'What a strong scent they have,' said Stephen, as they passed on; 'sleepy, somehow.'

He was curiously sensitive to all scents. It was true that there was something anæsthetic in it. It was almost malevolent.

They turned south.

'Mother'll be right pleased with them,' said Deborah, 'and with our tidings.'

At Slepe the vicar was waiting — beaming, benevolent, ready to let the past fortnight be a bygone now that they had done as they should.

'Well, Southernwood,' he said, shaking hands cordially; 'glad you've come. You won't regret it, my lad.'

Stephen was bored. Comment on any action of his annoyed him.

When they were married, the vicar patted Deborah's shoulder. He had christened her and prepared her for confirmation.

'God bless you, Mrs. Southernwood,' he whispered. Deborah's heart sang. She had followed every word of the service with thrills of joy. Stephen had yawned, watched the flies in the east window, yawned again, rumbled his hair in a way he had when his mind was not sufficiently occupied, and made the responses condescendingly. She did not notice it. She looked up at his sunburnt face, just thin enough for its firm contours to be visible, and she was wrapt in blessedness.

They took the path for Upper Leasowes. In an ash at the foot of the hills swallows were clustering for departure, with small cries and short, excited flights, and much preening of underwings, and low singing in the intervals of sunshine. As they climbed up to the Arden's cottage, Stephen was

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fighting against a sense of extreme flatness; he felt even more irritable, more overwhelmed with bathos, than he had done when he went out to the shippen. It was to his credit that he tried not to let Deborah know.

They crept up to the door stealthily, flung it open and rushed in. Mr. Arden shrieked. She was making jam in her working dress — print, with a large black apron, and one of Joe's caps rakishly pinned on her grey hair.

'Laws me! What'm you doing away from work, Stephen?'

'Getting married.'

She sat down on the chair on which she had previously placed her wimberries, amid peals of laughter.

'Well, well, dear sakes! I be glad. Not but what you'd ought to have done it a bright bit ago, Stephen.'

It irritated Stephen to be treated like a naughty but forgiven boy, when he wanted to feel like the grandiloquent hero of a drama.

'It's nothing to do with me,' he said, 'Deborah wanted it.'

'For sure she did and quite right, too, and I'm glad you've done it in such good time.'

'Good time for what, Mrs. Arden?'

'Never you mind, my lad. But you met be calling me Mother if you've a mind, seeing as you've done as you should.'

She wiped her eyes in a great fluster, looking, as she emerged from the basket of wimberries, like a stout Bacchanal.

'John! John! Wherever is the man? Never about when he's wanted, and under my feet, like the chickens, day in, day out, when he inna. John!'

'Coming, coming!' replied a muffled voice from the woodhouse.

'Didna I tell you, John, when you made such a Bob's-a-dying about these two, as it'd be all right? Well — it be. They're better-for-worsed as nice as nice, and they're man and wife for none to put asunder.'

The irrevocability, thus emphasized, irked Stephen. He stirred Rover with his foot, and frowned.

'Well, Mother,' said John, 'I didna think it was me that made the fuss, but I'm pleased that you're pleased, and I'll wish 'em both all good.' He smiled at them.

'And now, what about a bit of dinner, Mother? They'll be clemmed.'

As they were finishing dinner, Eli knocked. He presented a letter to Mrs. Arden with a scowl.

'Who's it from?' she asked.

'Me. You needna think it's a merrymaking nor yet a tea as you're invited to in that. It's nothing like them things — of the earth, earthy.'

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'Well, Eli, what is it then?' asked John, coming to the door and leaning against the post, pipe in mouth.

'It's me,' said Eli, 'the miserable sinner as you see afore you — but not such a sinner as some I could name.'

He placed one eye very close to the crack of the door, and watched Stephen as he surreptitiously kissed Deborah.

'An evil and adulterous generation — I see yer, Southern'ood. Where's my Bible?'

'Maybe you'd like to know, Eli,' said Mrs. Arden stiffly, 'as they're married, right and proper.'

'The words of the wise,' said Eli, 'that's to say, of me, have shown 'em the error of their ways.'

'Nothing of the sort, you old Jack-in-the-box,' muttered Stephen.

Eli's appreciation was a very bitter draught. He stood for everything that Stephen hated and feared.

'You met as well come along to chapel on Harvest Thanksgiving day — three prompt — and get saved, Southern'ood,' said Eli patronizingly. 'I be going to preach, very special.'

'What about?'

'Never you mind. You come, you and the woman God's give you.'

Eli looked at Deborah as if he thought the gift of doubtful worth.

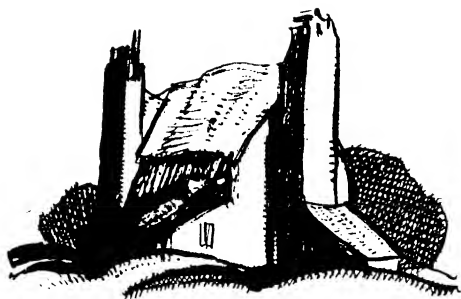
Stephen felt very emphatically that he had obtained Deborah by his own personal efforts. He got up.

'Well, we must be off, Deb.'

'Good evening, sinner!' said Eli. 'Be you going through Slepe?'

'Yes we can.'

'Well, you can take this here invitation to Joe and that darter of mine. It'll save me, and get some of the lust of youth out of you.'



CHAPTER 32

As they neared the cottage at Slepe in the early evening, under a sky of ink and gold, the sound of Lily's raised voice and hysterical sobbing came through the window.

'I *shall* keep it. I told the man I would — and pay two shillings a month.'

'It's to go back, straight,' replied Joe's voice obstinately.

'I *won't*!' screamed Lily. 'It's a lovely locket, and dirt cheap. I was going to put some of your nasty black hair in it —'

'Pack it up! Locketts — on sixteen shillings a week?'

Lily broke out crying afresh.

Deborah hurriedly knocked.

There was a startled silence. Then Joe appeared at the door, very dour and perspiring.

'Being as you've come,' he said, 'you met take a parcel for me to the post. Lily, bring that locket down when you come.'

'Joe, we thought we'd come and tell you as we'm married,' said Deborah.

'You don't say! Well, Stephen, I think the better on you. I do that, marriage — aye, a grand thing.'

Joe caught a smile on Stephen's face, which had a clenched look. He stopped, wondering how much of their quarrel had been overheard. There was another silence.

Deborah produced Eli's letter.

'Well, he *is* a funny old bird,' said Joe, opening the letter as he would open a poultry basket full of hens.

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"'Eli Huntbatch has pleasure in announcing" (is he having a sale, Stephen?) "as he intends to speak at three prompt, Sunday on Sin. His own in especial. The Lord wishes you to attend!"'

'The old fool's mad,' said Stephen.

At this moment Lily came down. She wore a green blouse, made low in the neck, and in the opening hung a locket made of a large imitation emerald. The brightness of the green glass set off her delicate complexion, and she was rather flushed from crying. Stephen looked at her with quite a spark of admiration and a sense of sympathy; for he, too, loved bright things — the glimmer on the surface of life. But he loved them because they concealed the black depths below; Lily loved them because they were all in all to her.

'They'm come to say as they're married,' said Joe — addressing the alarm clock, it seemed.

Lily was taken aback, put out. She had always felt and seemed so very righteous since Deborah's departure with Stephen. Now she had no such pleasure. It was scarcely worth while having children, she reflected, if they would have no advantage over Deborah's. For (she looked admiringly at Stephen, disparagingly at Joe) 'if mine take after their father, they *will* be plain-featured,' she said to herself.

'Well, Deb, I'm sure I'm glad to hear it,' she said. 'There couldna be any blessing without the holy estate, could there?' She looked at Joe again. 'The sweat's made streaks down your black face, Joe.' Her voice was like a knife. 'If you don't wash for your wife, you met for company.'

Joe departed to the wash-house, not, apparently, over-weighted with the blessings of the holy estate. Presently he put his head in.

'Come and see the pig, 'oot?' he asked Stephen in a non-committal manner.

They sat down on the bench where Joe cleaned the boots, at the other side of the cottage from the parlour window.

'Come and I'll show you my lace collar,' said Lily, when the men had gone. They went upstairs and sat down on the bed.

Deborah admired the collar; she was feeling pitiful towards Lily, because of her tear-flushed face and the smallness of her joys and sorrows. It seemed to her that Lily, whether safely married or guiltily unmarried, was cut out for small failures in love. She wondered why.

'I'd pack up this locket, if I was you, Lil,' she advised.

'Oh, you *was* listening, then!' Lily was bitter.

'I couldna help it, Lil.'

'H'm! Well, I want it. I'm fond on it.'

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'But you're fonder of Joe. Poor Joe! You'd liefer please him than have bits of jewellery.'

'Hush! Hark at 'em down there!'

From under the window came Stephen's voice —

'I thought, if you'd care for a bit of a loan, Joe, and surprise her —?'

'No. Thank 'ee kindly, Steve.'

'Jewellery's a lot to women,' said Stephen, out of the depth of his experience among the young ladies of Silverton.

'It shouldna be more than their chap. It inna to Deb, I swear, and yet you're getting good money.'

'Well, then —'

'No, Steve. It's right kind on you, but she mun learn to do on what I get. If she canna now, what about when the little 'uns come?'

'Good Lord, man, you're not thinking of kids already!'

Stephen's voice was full of surprised amusement.

'Aye.'

'Well, I'll be blowed!'

'I calc'lated it all up afore I axed Lil,' said Joe, 'of course. Who else would, if I didna?'

'Calculated what?'

'Wages and insurance and how many kids I thought to have.'

'And,' said Stephen, with the unevenness of laughter in his tone, 'what's the reckoning?'

'Six.'

'What?'

'Well, it's a good middling number. How many d'you want yourself?'

'O Lord! — none!'

Stephen desired to be exactly the opposite of Joe, and was much too amused to be serious.

'But why do you want six, man?' he continued.

'To do my duty.'

'Who to?'

'King and country.'

'And Lily?'

'Lily mun do hers.'

'But, Joe,' said Stephen, who already possessed a few qualities of a lover; 'but, Joe, I should have thought you'd want to make Lily happy.'

'Eh? chillun's what makes women happy. And is it the first thing you think on, day in, day out, making Deb happy?'

'I try to.'

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'Oh, well, as I said, you're a quick-change artist — all one thing one minute, and all summat else the next. I plods on the same. The girls we've married must take us as they find us.'

So they groped, like two half-blind men, among the great ripe orchards of life, picking up only such apples as they fell over — Stephen picking up most, because he stumbled oftenest.

Upstairs the two girls gazed out of the window at the ebony clouds, solid, crenellated, cut into curious capes and peninsulas, like huge maps of unknown lands. They elaborately avoided looking at each other.

'Six!' whispered Lily, and she fidgeted so feverishly with the locket that she broke the clasp.

'You're lucky, Deb! Your Stephen's worth a hundred of Joe.'

'None!' thought Deborah, and a mist came over her. Also she had a vague sense of something being out of joint in that Stephen should talk to another man — to any one but herself — in this way.

'Fancy him wanting to give me the locket!' Lily said. Present joy, pleased vanity, curiosity as to whether Deborah would be jealous, elbowed away the shadow of the future.

Deborah was not jealous. Stephen loved her, she thought. Soul and body, they were all each other's. To her the fact that Stephen had asked and taken all that she had to give — spiritual and physical — was the absolute proof that he loved her. And if he loved her, he felt to her as she did to him. Anything, therefore, that he might do or be to others was charity. Could her perfect peace have been shaken, and a doubt dwelt in her, still there would have been no jealousy, for, if she had doubted his love, she would simply have resigned all claim on him, become nothing to him. Lily could not understand her.

'I hope Joe'll let him,' Deborah said.

'Joe's that busy doing his duty to a man as never so much as saw his soft face, that he's got no time to think of me,' said Lily, with acidity. 'If he dunna give me bits of things, who will? I'll only be young once. I'll only be pretty for a bit, and wanting to enjoy myself — but the wold country as Joe's so set on, it's always the same.' She clenched her hands. 'I hate it!' she cried; 'them old trees and the hills as'll be just as blue-coloured when I be dead.'

'There, there, Lil!' said Deborah. 'Joe dunna really care for them things more than he does for you; it's just men's silly way of talking,' she added, dismissing with maternal amusement the whole school of masculinity summed up in —

'I could not love thee, dear, so much' . . .

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'Hark!' said Lily.

'I wonder where those girls are,' came Stephen's voice. He had an uneasy intuition.

'In the parlour, where we left them.'

That they should exhibit initiative was evidently not in Joe's mind.

'Let's go and see.'

Upstairs there was a moth-like flutter: downstairs a heavy crunching of gravel. In the parlour, when Joe and Stephen entered, sat two exemplary wives, deep in the perusal of Lily's new cookery-book.





CHAPTER 33

As Deborah and Stephen walked home in an increasing tumult of wind, under clouds like froth in a tide-race of black water, Deborah waited for him to tell her of his talk with Joe. She meant to confess her unintentional eavesdropping, and she thought how amused Stephen would be. She wondered if Stephen would tell her that he only said 'none' for the sake of differing from Joe. She thought how sweet it would be to speak softly about the future — to know each other's mind to the depths.

But Stephen said nothing. He had forgotten all about it. Had he remembered he would have thought it rather an improper subject upon which to enter with her. In the society he had known it was not considered decent to talk to a woman about any of the physical necessities of life except eating. A woman who was to give herself to a man and bear his children was not consulted in either matter. A tacit understanding was the nearest approach allowed.

Stephen walked on moodily. He was thinking how dull the country was getting, how forlorn. For the colours were withdrawing with what seemed to him the terrible leisureliness of fatality. They would soon be gone as the willow-wrens were gone from the woods below Lostwithyn, as the cuckoos had long been gone from hill and field. The density was gone from the shadows, scent dwindled daily; the stars were like scimitars instead of silver flowers.

As they reached the hill-top a late mountain moth wandered vaguely over the heather — shining whitely here, for, from some accident of soil, it was never purple, but of a bleached pallor, for acres round the Chair.

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When they stood a moment by Cranberry Rock, which was like a lesser throne for some dignitary, an owl cried with its long, laughing shudder from the ragged holly spinney down the southern slope.

'It's saying — "What ails you?"' said Deborah.

'What a vile bird it is — and what a shake it puts on "ails",' said Stephen, 'like the stop on the harmonium. Autumn's beastly. When I was going to work yesterday I saw a regular gang of swallows in an ash, getting ready to go. All the corn'll be in before long too, and the heather dead.'

'Aye. But the turn o' the year'll come agen afore we know it.'

'Not for nearly half a year. We might be dead before it.'

'Oh, Stephen!'

'Well, we might. It's just luck. How do we know, if there's nobody to look after us? We might be like frozen bees any day — not a bit of us left except a carcase for the mixen.'

It was the outermost fringe of his hidden grief; the pity of it was that he only showed her the fringe. He was afraid to look at the thing himself, and so it was like a beast behind undergrowth. He did not regard her as a being who might have helped him. She was the weaker — he her protector. A deep reciprocity of sympathy and strength between lovers had never occurred to him. With a mixture of cowardice before the problems of immensity and mistaken manliness towards Deborah he crushed down all his questionings, fears, horrors, and was silent.

'Oh, Stephen!' said Deborah now; 'I be sorry you feel that — but we mun hope things is better'n that for us. I'm thinking there's good beyond it all.'

She had not made herself a philosophy; she had lived in such simplicity that it had not occurred to her. Now, faced for the first time by a grief that her love told her needed comfort, she searched in the recesses of her being and found this intuition there like a rosy flower.

But to Stephen — used to people who said much and meant little — her words seemed cold, conventional, empty. He said no more.

The heather screeched, the rocks moaned and whined as the wind probed their crevices. The Chair was obscured at intervals by low, driving clouds.

'Don't let's go nearer to it than we can help,' said Stephen, 'it's so beastly.' He laughed constrainedly.

They went by a smaller path lower down.

'When I'm feared of it,' said Deborah, 'I think of Wilderhope and the Flockmaster. I dreamt I saw him standing by a white cross — by the signpost — with a lamb in his arms; and his face was your face.'

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'Mine?'

'Aye. Only terrible sorrowful-like.'

'Hope the dream won't come true, then. Who's he supposed to be?'

'I don't know. Father learnt me the tale. He said it meant as there was love about, going to-and-agen in spite of Devil's Chairs and all. And he said —' Deborah puckered her brow in thought, as she put back long blown ends of her hair — 'he said there were plenty of little crosses in the world, as some folk took to be only posts, but they were crosses sure enough, and love hanging on em' — "for ever martyred and for ever gladsome" — that's his very words.'

'Oh! Christianity-talk. I can do that myself — could until I chucked it.'

'No. Not chapel nor church Christianity. Just home-brewed,' said Deborah. 'I allus seemed to believe in them things, when I was in chapel, like you believe in flowers in winter. But when father talked of 'em, I *knew* 'em. It was like cowslips in your hand. Keys of heaven, cowslips be called.'

'A pretty name.'

'Aye.'

'Shall we go after cowslips together, Deb? Next June?'

'Aye.'

'And now let's go in and light the fire and the lamp and cook a bit of supper and play something lively,' said Stephen.

He was determined not to think, since thought opened the door to such horror. What if there had never been a grain of truth in any creed, and everything — all the beauty, the goodness, the effort, the achievement — were purposeless as dust in the wind, fortuitous, annihilated now, to-morrow or in an æon? What if he were no more than the moth, flickering for a moment in imbecile activity on the bleak mountain in the cold night wind? Such thoughts, like chained bloodhounds, awoke often unexpectedly, and lifted their voices; howling for his soul. What if one broke loose? What if it followed with irresistible, unswerving pace till he was in its grip?

He shuddered. He knew that then joy would be dead. And joy was air and water to him. He clenched his hands. They should not get loose. He piled on wood and made a roaring fire, made toast, pulled Deborah on to his knee, and made love to her in his own inimitable way, with his eager face and eyes full of vitality, his mouth — which could be grim or tortured — now pleasant with laughter.

The idea of going in among those kennelled hounds of thought, braving them, and either being consumed by them or taming them, never occurred

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to him. If it had, the idea would not have appealed to him; for he had physical, not moral courage.

They sat in the fire glow, ringed in an impalpable peace and joy until the glow should fade.

'Oh! I say, Deb! I made you something coming from work yesterday.'

He felt in an inner pocket and pulled out a long chain of scarlet beads.

'Rose-berries! And on a string and all!'

He put it over her head. She laughed with pleasure. The berry-color was repeated in fainter tints in her cheeks; her eyes shone.

The long necklace hung down over her dress like a rosary.

'Now, out with the hairpins!' said Stephen.

'Oh, you're allus doing that!'

'You're always looking so pretty! There! My word, Deb, you're ripping.'

Deborah took courage from this.

'What did you and Joe talk about?' she asked.

'His beastly pig.'

'What else?'

'Nothing.'

'Eh, Stephen, what a fib!'

'A fib? How?'

She shook her hair over her face.

'I heard.'

'Oh.'

A humorous thought made him forget propriety in laughter.

'Did Lily hear old Joe's programme?'

'Aye.'

'What a lark!'

'Not for Lily.'

'H'm. No. I dare say not.'

'Stephen!'

'Well?'

'It wasn't only Joe that said things.'

'Did I put my foot in it too? Well? Out with it.'

She was silent. He remembered suddenly, and was embarrassed.

'That? I had to say something. He was so solemn.'

'You said it to aggravate Joe?'

'Partly. But don't let's fag about it. It seems a funny thing to talk to you about.'

'Who else so right?'

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In her question was the sense of injury that she felt because he talked to Joe with a frankness he had not shown to her. She sat with the firelight flitting over her, wistful, with the lit look which came from within, and which would have singled her out of a roomful of women for a man's love. Yet the essence of her being, the unique thing which caused that look was what he least understood in her.

'Who else?' she asked again with more insistence. Pride conquered her girlish shyness. He did not answer; he was looking at her with a return of his first passion.

'Who else should you talk of your children to but the 'ooman as'll bear them?' she said, and her voice shook with sorrowful indignation. 'Who else should you tell your wishes to, and your sorrows and looking-forward, and the way you mislike the wind, nights? (and that I know along of you covering your ears). You dunna tell me any of them.'

She stood looking down at him with a dignity seldom found in civilization — almost always among savage tribes.

'Oh, damn!' cried Stephen, springing up, so that her height diminished; 'd'you suppose I can *talk* to you when you look like that? Give us a kiss, Deb!'

'Eh, dear!' Deborah shivered suddenly. 'There's a thorn in your neck-lace, Stephen!'





CHAPTER 34

A WEEK later a sudden hard frost blackened the geraniums in the garden. Stephen detested the look of them. He found this enforced intimacy with every mood of Nature, this impossibility of getting away from stark realities, very wearing after living in a town. He did not realize that half the content of his past town life was owing to his unawakened state.

A town to him now would be little more restful than the wilds. Reality was after him; go where he would he was its quarry, because of the greatness in him. There are some who, like the white hart in old Welsh tales, are for ever hunted while small game goes free. If he had escaped from the lost, vindictive cries of the storm, the starved garden, the neutral colours, the heavy pressure of the huge night on his heart, with its mute 'whither?' he would still have had to face plaintive cries from dark houses, tormented faces in the street, the dumb terror of animals driven to slaughter. He did not know this. He put the blame for his keener vision, his new, unwelcome capacity for acting as a receiver for these messages out of hidden mysteries, upon the gaunt horizon, the huge knife-like ridge on which he lived, and the opposite ridge that broadened into mountain plains, shadowy in the early autumn mornings as the fleeces of cloud that swept over them. Lesser men dwell in impregnable castles of content in the most lonely, the most populous places. Greater men set forth on quests against all the agony and mystery of life, and win their peace or go into a madhouse. But Stephen was too clear-sighted for the first, too much the bondsman of joy for the second. Therefore he lived at present in vivid sunshine — like a butterfly between two night-frosts, a poet between two portents.

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Every day the reaches of plain, the ridges and rock-masses, the glittering spar and the men that tore it from its bed with such reckless expenditure of their little share of life, were more hateful to him. The woods that he went through on his way to work grew spectral, cold mist swirled there; dead leaves hung on the boughs like rows of weasels and magpies before a keeper's house. A cold presence moved among the sad perspectives of the larch and oak boles; sinister, inimical to joy, the Dark Keeper went his rounds — strangling life, hanging the shrivelled corpse of beauty in the bleak air derisively. Stephen felt his presence; saw his snares laid for men; began to feel that all humanity was but a poor line of rotting leaves and blackening corpses before the hollow house of death.

One day, as he walked in a gloomy reverie, a sudden noise behind him made him start. He looked back; there in driven, protesting, panic-stricken hosts came all the leaves of the summer — all the tongues that made soft music night and day, all the silken curtains under which pigeons had crooned, over which rain had slipped laughing. They came like a driven sandstorm, some a yard or more high, swirling in the eddying wind, others in a thick mass low down. They came round him — hitting him as terrified birds hit a window; patting, stroking him, till he felt as if he were fingered by corpses. Their stiff helplessness horrified him. They passed on in a frenzy of nothingness, feckless with the coming of corruption.

'Damned things!' he muttered. 'I won't come this way again.'

Fear crept over him as he reflected that he, Stephen Southernwood, the strong and happy, was afraid of dead leaves. He thought his sanity must be threatened. The hollow scraping sound of a fresh company of leaves swelled behind him. He ran uphill to the end of the wood.

He looked through the gathering dusk towards the cottage, and saw the one window red as a poppy. She was there waiting for him; she would not fail him. Only he could not tell her. He laughed unsteadily.

'Blessed if a chap could tell a woman he was in a funk at some dead leaves!'

Night by night he came home a little sooner, was a little more flushed with haste.

All day long the picture of the red-curtained kitchen with the round table set for tea, the steaming kettle, and Deborah — neat and bright in her new berry-coloured dress — making tea, were to his mind what the Sacrament is to a Christian. The evenings were happy times, radiant as those last autumn days when the spendthrift gold shines with the strange intense lustre of fleeting things.



‘He, Stephen Southernwood, was afraid of dead leaves’

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Only in his passion for her could he forget everything — even the predatory whine of the wind. He felt immune as a god while in its aura. Should she fail him, he thought one night when the storm shook the cottage and she lay asleep in his arms, he would be a beggar — a prey for every despair. He wished more and more as September slipped by that he had never taken the cottage. The whole countryside was acquiring in his eyes something portentous, apocalyptic. For the personality of a man reacting upon the spirit of a place produces something which is neither the man nor the place, but fiercer or more beautiful than either. This third entity, born of the union, becomes a power and a haunting presence — non-human, non-material. For the mind that helped to create it once, it dominates the place of its birth for ever. Hence came the troops of mediæval saints and devils. Hence came folk-plays, nature poems, sonatas — the heights of vision, the depths of melancholy.

Stephen could have made these ridges and valleys immutable in lyrics or elegiacs, painted them in radiant atmospheres, liquefied them in symphonies. But he had not the technical training for any of these. He only had the capacity for pain. He had not the safeguard of expression.

'Deb,' he said one day, when the first light snow powdered the dawn-cold hills, 'couldn't we go away somewhere? I do hate this place.'

'Go away? Oh, Stephen!'

She had no key to his state of mind. He had told her nothing of his feelings. It seemed to her simply a freak.

'But the work? And it's so scarce, and winter coming and all.'

She did not want to move, to disturb the warmth and peace of their home. Doubts, fancies, wonder had come upon her lately. She wanted to be anchored here, in the hills of home, near her father.

'You brought me here, Stephen,' she said pleadingly. 'Dunna root me up agen.'

He said no more. Every day he pulled his collar up, shrugged his shoulders and set his mind to endurance of things so impalpable that he could not express them even to himself — but none the less real for that. He forced himself into some of the moral courage he lacked. His personality grew. The men felt his presence more, though he said less.

Towards the end of the month was the harvest thanksgiving in Wood's End Chapel — the day of Eli's extraordinary invitation. Deborah wanted to go.

She saw less of her father now, for ways had grown almost impassable. The homely associations of the harvest service and the tea — never missed from childhood — made her anxious to be there, if Stephen would go.

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'Would you mislike going, Stephen?' she asked longingly.

Any festivity, anything that meant light, colour, human merriment, appealed to Stephen; it helped to keep the other things at bay.

'All right, I'll come. I'll make you a new berry necklace, too,' he promised, his spirits rising. 'All the fellows will be jealous, and Lily will be green with envy.'

'Why?'

'Jealous of your prettiness.'

He had summed up Lily in a way that would have surprised her.

'It's a goodish walk,' said Deborah, wondering if she could manage it, for she had felt tired lately.

'Oh, nothing to people like you and me, Deb! Lazy girl! Suppose you want me to hire a trap, h'm?'

'Oh no, Stephen! I can walk right enow.'

She was troubled, none the less, at finding that when she went to meet him in the evenings (which he had asked her to do after the dead leaf episode), she flagged, and could not keep up with his stride.

'I'll go and see old Nancy Corra,' she reflected. 'She'll give me summat to take off the sick feeling and the tiredness. She's got stuff for 'most everything.'

She also thought that Nancy could give an authoritative opinion on the suspicions, fears and hopes that had possessed her lately.

'She'll be at tea, Sunday; I met fix a day to go then,' Deborah decided.





CHAPTER 35

NANCY CORRA was always to the fore in camp meetings, revivals, services where conversions took place, and teas. She lived at a hamlet half-way down the ridge, at some distance from Lostwithin, called the Clays. Huge heaps of lead refuse rose in unwholesome whiteness, like mounds of rather dirty sugar, round the deserted mines. Grey water trickled stealthily between them. Somewhere here the Romans mined for lead.

'Wold ancient mines they be,' Nancy would say, 'and a vast of lead's been took from 'em, time and agen.'

Her small cottage stood among the white mounds, with a strip of garden at the back where she grew her 'yarbs'. Here were horehound, tansy, pennyroyal, balm o' Gilcad, all-heal, mallow and a hundred more. She had trouble with them, for the soil did not suit many. She would plod up into the larch-woods with an old bucket and shovel and bring back leaf-mould for them; and they survived, though their leaves were often strangely spotted.

'There be a curse on the place,' people would say as they passed at dusk, and they would shiver and hurry on. It certainly had an unkempt air, and the house a wary secrecy. Nothing could be brought against Nancy, yet the police in the neighbouring villages eyed her unfavourably, and now and then one would watch her house. That is to say, he would, with much trampling and clambering, hide in the deserted engine-house and go to sleep there. He was watched in his advent and departure by a satiric Nancy.

'Wise as sarpents they sim to theirselves, and harmless as doves they be,' was her comment on the police force. She knew that her secrets — secrets that might possibly have cost her life and certainly would have gained her several years in prison — were safe. Yet they were spread over the

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countryside, in the keeping of gypsies, wives of labourers, barmaids at small taverns on untravelled roads, women who tramped, pedlars and unmarried girls of all classes. Her unacknowledged patients were few. Her acknowledged patients — old folks with rheumatism, rickety children, field workers with a gashed hand or a whitlow, drunkards' wives with bodies covered with bruises — she prescribed for with surprising efficiency; her cures were simple, often drastic, usually very sensible. But her real patients — those who made her income — came in the evening, closely shawled. They crept up to her shut door and curtained windows through the colewort and butterbur at the foot of the gaunt mounds, when they were terrible with inky shadows. They would tap the window, and the door would open softly, revealing old Nancy's extraordinary figure. She wore her thick, grey hair hanging to her shoulders, cut square like Raphael's portrait of himself, and she scratched it with suspicious frequency. Under this thatch her aquiline nose, lead-coloured cheeks and cunning mouth were unpleasant; but when she looked up suddenly at people they started with surprise at her beautiful eyes. How such eyes came to light such a face was a mystery — one of the curious instances of compensation which make optimists of people who see life as a whole. They were Cymric eyes — kin to the Gaelic, but less merry, less melancholy. Keen, far-seeing, mysterious, sardonic, they were of a clear periwinkle grey, with lashes that seemed as long and dark on the lower as on the upper lid. They seemed too large, too lustrous, for her face. They were spacious enough for the wistfulness of a saint.

'Eh, Nancy Corra, if you'd give me your eyes, he'd marry me to-morrow,' she was told sometimes.

Mrs. Arden, if anyone spoke of Nancy in her presence, flew into a rage.

'Eyes! Aye, she's got eyes. Got 'em off the devil down the wych-elm spinney in among the dead-men's-fingers!' she would say. There was a deadly feud between them. Yet their professions did not clash. Nancy was never called in by Mrs. Arden's cases. 'She'd o'erlook the child,' the women said. Most people shared Mrs. Arden's belief that Nancy had gained her mysterious knowledge from the devil. Whether, in her interference with natural laws, Nancy did unmixed evil, or whether she helped to right the balance of punishment between the sexes for the sin of 'going too far', was a puzzling question. But it was quite clear that she was in herself an arrant hypocrite.

Deborah knew of the feud between Nancy and her mother, but Nancy lived near and had won quite a reputation by her cures of small ailments; also it was a long way to a doctor in Silverton.



CHAPTER 36

THE harvest thanksgiving day was clear and mellow. Under the low grey sky the rooks went cawing to the stubble fields; blackberries were ripe; and in the quiet woods Deborah and Stephen saw the bird-cherries flaming with red leaves, and witan-trees burning with scarlet berries. The purple had nearly gone from the plateau round the signpost; but the wimberry leaves were of an intensely bright red. They came to the chapel slowly, for Deborah was tired and leant on Stephen's arm. She wore her berry-coloured dress and the necklace. Within, the chapel was decorated with corn and wild apples, heaps of fruit, yellow fern and nuts. Eli had sent a quantity of eggs, which was thought very generous until a decorator broke one. Mrs. Arden had sent her usual giant loaf, and Mr. Shakeshaft his usual miniature haystack, made by himself, Joe and the farm boy.

Deborah and Stephen met a fire of critical observation, for they were romantic, wicked, repentant and well-favoured all at once.

Mrs. Arden, in a flutter of excitement — for she was to officiate as a pourer at the head of a table, and she wore the famous gown — beckoned them to sit by herself and John. Then Joe and Lily came in, Joe very red and smiling, Lily self-possessed. Eli, sitting at the top of the chapel, surveyed them all inimically.

Lucy Thruckton entered, and the two young brides surveyed her, the one with pity, the other with scorn. Deborah noticed that Nancy was there, very splendid in a tartan blouse. Lily managed to sit between Joe and Stephen, and observed Stephen's keen profile and slim, muscular hand with much approval. Stephen was remembering the last time he was here,

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how glibly he talked of death, how absolutely impenetrable he was then to the reality of it. He stared at Eli in order not to think, and Eli stared back at him unblinkingly. Joe was answering various winks and nods of young men friends in kind, Lily was looking satirically at Lucy, who appeared in her balloon-like white dress like a cow in muslin.

In the hymns — which depressed Stephen because they were all about harvest being over and the final harvest of death — Joe boomed like a fog-horn, and Nancy, who had an extraordinarily metallic and powerful voice, annoyed Mrs. Arden extremely, and reminded Deborah of her coming interview. John looked round them all with his usual benevolence, and Eli rasped with fervour —

‘Whatever, Lord, I lend to Thee
Repaid a thousandfold will be,
Therefore I lend my all to Thee!’

It was a hymn he liked. There was a cheerful compound interest about it.

Later on he preached his sermon.

‘The Lord’s druv me to it,’ he said, ‘now listen what I’ll tell you.’

He discoursed at great length and with real emotion about Speedwell, and how he had ‘overdruv’ her.

He was stirred to eloquence, and they all thought him ‘touched’ — except John.

‘I be a great sinner,’ he said, and they all thought he was posing, except John.

Then he grew weary of reality and preached in his usual ranting style, and they all thought what a grand preacher he was — except John.

As he ranted, Stephen sat immovable, seeing Christianity, every religion, the bedrock of all religions — belief in some great purpose, some pity at the back of things — all these, caricatured as he had never seen them before. Blankness fell on him. He felt that Eli, Eli’s sermon, Eli’s God, were frauds. The devil seemed to be Eli’s intimate friend — well, there was *no* devil. God seemed to be in Eli’s confidence. ‘Well,’ said Stephen to himself, with passion, ‘there is *no* God.’

No anything. No immortality.

Here the horror deepened so that his head swam. Those bloodhounds — his thoughts! At last the feared disaster had happened, one of them had broken loose — was on his track.

It was the horror of emptiness, utter negation — that modern ghost, more ghastly than mediæval devils or the ancient gods of slaughter.

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Any god — however mutable, however cruel — he thought, would be better than this nullity. Suddenly the whole thing was summed up and symbolized for him in the Devil's Chair — an empty throne. There it was; no devil, no angel, no god ever was there, ever would be there, nothing. There was no court of appeal, there was not even any one to defy, cure, be tortured by; just vacancy and the insect-like lives of himself and the other millions in the world, all going nowhere for no purpose except extinction.

He shuddered at the appalling picture. He could not get the look of the empty throne of black rock from his mind. He crushed Deborah's hand until she whispered 'Stephen', white with pain.

Eli's voice droned on. The sleepy flies in the ugly windows drone. Joe, wrapt in rosy and health-giving slumber, gave little snores and was violently poked by Lily.

Lucy Thruckton beamed when Eli painted hurriedly in grey tints the joys of paradise, and still beamed during his half-hour's digression on hell. It became obvious that she was so tightly laced that her face must crease in some way, and so good-natured that it creased from ear to ear.

John was lost in contemplation. He was thinking of the radiant mornings on which he had felt — as some felt in Galilee a while ago — a Presence near him, and, as they did, 'wist not who it was'. He smiled at the remembrance of the transcendent beauty of the hills on those days, the wistful meaning in the cry of the sheep, the quiet messages in the rain.

Eli saw the smile.

'Cursed are they that smile, for they shall weep,' he said, adroitly transposing the text.

'An' all they that rejoice shall be utterly cast down. "When the silver cord is loosed an' the golden bowl is broken —"'

Stephen gave a smothered groan and stood up, with his hand to his head. He could sit there with his thoughts no longer — he went out into the air.

'And Judas went out an' it was night,' said Eli patly.

'Only it ain't,' said Joe under his breath. 'We'm not 'ad our teas yet.'

Deborah looked at Eli with flashing eyes; she had never been so angry; she followed Stephen out.

He was sitting on the wall resting his head on his hand.

'Oh, Stephen, my dear, what's come o'er you?' she asked, with a hand on his shoulder.

'Only a bit of headache.'

'You'll come back to the tea? A cup of tea'll do you good.'

'I can't. That old devil —'

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'Eli? He's done prating now. If he starts on you agen, I'll give him a bit of my mind. Do 'ee come, Stephen.'

'All right.'

'Not if you'd liefer go home?'

'No. It's all right.'

They went back. There was a great bustle of moving benches and carrying in tables for tea. The two women who had been preparing it in a side room came in with tablecloths. Every one ran about with plates, except Lucy, who sat in pleasurable anticipation, remarking —

'Naught done's harm to none.'

At last all was ready, and Mrs. Arden, Mrs. Shakeshaft and Mrs. Prior of Long Acre took their places at the head of the tables.

'Lord, Stephen!' exclaimed Patty, 'you look as if you'd seen a ghost.'

'My old man,' said Nancy, from another table (she always mentioned this fictitious gentleman with great emotion), 'seed a ghost just afore he was took for dyeath.'

'Dear now!' commented Lucy, with her mouth full of cake. 'It was a bad day for him.'

'It'll be a bad un for you, if you gulp all that cake so fast,' muttered Eli. 'You're too kind to yourself, young 'ooman. If you was my darter —'

'Well — what, Father?' Lily asked, amused to see Lucy subsiding in self-conscious blushes.

'If her was my darter,' said Eli slowly, so that all eyes in the room were focused on the unfortunate Lucy, 'I'd give her a good thrashing twice a day, and get some of that there fat off'n her.'

Having reduced Lucy to tears, he rubbed his hands and turned his attention elsewhere.

'Spare the rod and spoil the child. Now, look at my darter — a respectable young married 'ooman — and all because I didna spare it.'

Lily crimsoned and looked appealing at Joe.

'Hush your row, Eli!' he muttered.

'And look at others I could name — the darter of a softhearted man here present. What's it brought her to?'

Here he swallowed the bread and jam, which he was charily eating, in one extravagant mass, as he reflected afterwards with regret. Stephen continued to shake him until his head rolled about.

'Say another word, and I'll knock your beastly head off!' he cried, all his misery finding an outlet in rage. Eli's teeth chattered with the shaking, but he was undaunted.

'Gi' me back my Bible, you young thief,' he said, 'or I'll summons you.'

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'Now, now, Eli and Stephen,' said John. 'You'm spoiling the party.'

Mr. Shakeshaft started an elaborate conversation with Joe and another man about the merit of two sheep-dips.

Mrs. Arden, elegantly pouring out, turned to Eli and remarked —

'If I was you, Mr. Huntbatch, I'd make the most of the time, since yo a'll pay no more if you chaw till nine.'

There was a general titter, Eli's economies being well known.

'John,' said Eli, portentously, 'yer taste in religion makes me afraid for yer, yer taste in cattle makes me sorry for yer, but yer taste in wor en makes me heave.'

Stephen seemed cut off from the rest, stamped with a peculiar mark, ringed by the infinities. Homely scenes, kind faces, the four comfortingly commonplace walls, even Deborah had receded, the whole world had rolled up like a drop-scene and left him facing blank nothingness.

He could not get his spiritual experiences in touch with real life at all. Life ceased to be real. It was a hum of insects round carrion. All these people — himself — had acquired a vagueness, a fleetingness; only the thing he had felt was true; negation was the only fact — the rest, dreams.

He thought of books, of how eagerly he had read them to find the truth when he was a lad at the college.

But there was no truth, seemingly, nothing to find out.

He thought how he had striven to keep straight, how fiercely he had repented and punished himself when he had sinned. But there was no sin — no goodness — nowhere to get to by going straight. The system of reward and punishment had never appealed to him; herein had lain the originality of his crude, rather mixed preaching. But the idea of continued existence after death had been to him a sufficient reason for all effort, a sufficient reward for all hardships.

It seemed perfectly useless to him to make any effort, if the grave were all. This sense of negation drugged every faculty, and his vitality struggled against it unavailingly. He looked across the table, steamy and fragrant with tea, at John's calm face and eyes like cwm-water. He wondered how John would look and what he would say, if he could make him understand his state of mind.

Every one at the tea, all the world of men outside seemed inchoate, purposeless, like the swarming, slimy, minute life in stagnant water. He felt sick.

'Stephen, lad,' said John in his voice which was quietude, 'you met drink a sup of tea, and you'll feel better.' He leaned across the table amid a buzz of talk. 'And, lad,' he said, 'there's an answer to every question, and at long last the light shines.'

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Stephen was startled. How did John know? Ah, well — what matter? He and John and the rest were nothing — a few midges, humming for a day. It did not matter what they thought or were. Yet John's words, his look, remained at the back of Stephen's mind, and he wondered idly now and then whether John had had any experience to warrant them or whether it was the usual kind of cant.

'Well, Mr. Cadwallader, so you've got a son!' said Mrs. Prior.

'Ou? Aye.' The proud father indifferently munched a pie.

'And its mother doing well?'

'Ou? Aye.'

'And I hear he's like his father.'

'The very moral of him, poor lamb!' broke in Mrs. Arden, with a sympathy quite lost on the father, who ate largely and with the efficiency of a chaffcutter. All the women surveyed his knobby head, huge mouth, minute nose and batlike ears, and felt intense sympathy for Mrs. Cadwallader.

When tea was over, Nancy slipped up to Lily.

'And how are you, my pretty?' she asked.

'All right, thank you.'

'Now you tell old Nancy all about it.'

She edged Lily into a corner. Deborah, coming to speak to her, heard Lily arranging to go and see her.

'Come along of me, Lily,' she said.

They agreed to go on the following Saturday, as Lily had reasons of her own for wishing to go when Joe was at market.

'And what about All Hallowe'en?' Mrs. Arden said suddenly, mindful of future festivities now that this was nearly over. 'We mun have a bit of a randy for it, no danger! There'll be the accorns, and the nuts and the apples to sort, and I could do with a bit of help. So suppose you come, Deb and Stephen, and stop the night over. Joe and Lil, you come and have a bit of supper, and you, Eli and Lucy — if there inna too much weather for coming so far.'

'Oh, I'll come, weather or no weather,' said Lucy.

'Aye, her will!' said Eli. 'Her's like a young duck — always hankering. "Whose god is their belly"!''

'Manners!' said Mrs. Prior, majestically.

'And I'll get some nice pippins ready, and cobs and that, and we'll play All Hallows games.'

'I wunna play never no wicked games,' said Eli. 'Now listen what I'll tell you. Such games is cursed in Leviticus, Tobias and the rest of the prophets. Witchcraft, they be. I wunna come if you have games.'

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'Stop away, then, and good riddance!' said his son-in-law heartily.

'On second thoughts I *will* come,' snapped Eli, 'to keep you from selling your souls too cheap.'

'Well, it'll be four weeks to-day,' Mrs. Arden announced, 'and mind you all come. Not but what it inna much use to play them games whe a we're all married.'

'Except Lucy,' Lily giggled.

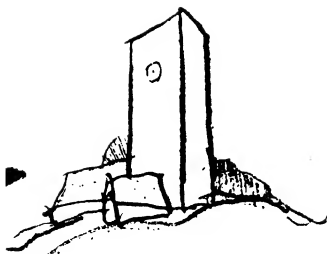
Lucy flushed, remembering what Li y had said at the Fair.

'But still,' Mrs. Arden reasoned, 'there's things as we can still be inte - ested in, if we *be* married.'

Nancy laughed sardonically.

Eli rose, remarking, 'Well, we must be going to our happy whome . We've thanked the Lord for six morta. hours for the worst corn harve t there's been for years, so let's hope He'll do better with the roots.'

He slammed the chapel door behind him.



CHAPTER 37

As they walked home it suddenly seemed to Stephen that Deborah was holding him chained to the ridge by virtue of the marriage into which she had persuaded him. As he thought it, a blight fell on his love for her, and it flagged, instead of flowering, as it might have done, and filling the world and making all questions unnecessary. He strode on doggedly and did not speak. She kept up as well as she could, and made breathless little remarks to which he gave no reply.

When they reached Cranberry Rock, she was so exhausted that she sank down and began to cry. He went on, oblivious of her absence.

'Stephen!' she called frantically. 'Stephen!'

He turned.

'Hullo, what's the matter?'

'I canna go any further. I mun bide a bit.'

'Not tired, surely?'

'Aye, mortal tired.'

Before her tears, her helplessness, he forgot his sense of injury. The lover in him came to the top.

'Poor little girl!' he whispered. 'There, I'll carry you.'

He carried her down the steep slope, dodging the flat, white stones that lay about. He thought they were like tombstones with no name, no date, no word of hope, fit (as he bitterly reflected) for the nameless, dateless dead, beasts and men, who had gone into the silence of annihilation. A horror of them came on him; there were so many; one would surely be spared to crush his own life, his own joy which he wanted. Suddenly he caught his foot on one, and stumbled.

'Leave me walk now, Stephen!' said Deborah. 'You're too tired and it's too steep.'

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'No, I'll carry you.'

'Oh, *please*, Stephen!'

He went on, still carrying her. He felt that only her weight, her nearness, kept him from flinging himself over the rock-wall that dropped sheer to the plain away on their left. Deborah gave up the argument, inwardly delighted at not getting her way.

'How strong you be, Stephen! Don't your arms ache?'

'No.'

His heart did. He felt that he was doing his duty to Deborah. He was acting up to what he had promised. The thought that it was his duty took away the charm. His love for her, which had been slowly growing from the mere desire of the young male for the female that is his mate, and might in time have become an all-inclusive passion, was checked like a plant in drought.

'What a God-forsaken place this is!' said Stephen, in the irritation of overwrought nerves, when they reached the cottage, crouching there like a white mouse petrified with fear.

Deborah leant against the doorpost. She had no vitality left to spend for him, but she smiled.

'For goodness' sake, let's go in,' he said in a fever. 'Here, I'll light the fire. What in hell we went to that awful affair for, I don't know.'

She said nothing, and he thought her unsympathetic and cold.

At last the fire blazed, and things looked better.

'There! Now let's sit here, and have a good supper and hot drinks and a game of cards — or something.'

'But, Stephen — can't we go to bed?'

'You can, if you like. I shan't.'

He instinctively felt that the first edge of things must wear off before he dared trust himself to sleep.

'But why, Stephen?'

'I'm not tired. It's a good fire, and I want to sit by it.'

'I'll stay along of you, then,' said Deborah heroically. But she fell asleep in her chair as she said it, and Stephen helped her upstairs. The cold air and the loneliness after he went down struck sleep from her, and she lay and cried, too tired to move but not too tired to feel. She thought she had offended him.

Below, by the dying fire, Stephen sat and brooded, read a week-old paper, nodded, tramped to and fro, and brooded again. The hours went by as silently as owls. Frost tingled outside; stars perched on the Devil's Chair, like goldfinches on a black stump, and flitted west.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

The Chair looked dark and gigantic, and not so much like a saddlebag chair as it did from some places, but more like an embattled castle where no torch shone.

In the morning Deborah, coming down early after a restless night, found Stephen asleep, with his head on the table. She stole about lighting the fire and making tea; then she kissed him, holding the cup invitingly before him. He woke stiff and exhausted.

'I dreamt —' he said; 'oh, no! it wasn't a dream.'

A weary look came over him.

'Ne'er mind what it was, dear lad!' said Deborah. 'Draw up to the fire and have this — it'll hearten you up.'

She cooked some bacon and toast, and the little room grew reassuringly comfortable.

'You make things so different, Deb,' he said gratefully.

'You're not angered with me?'

'Of course not.'

'Then naught matters. We're together, and that cures all. Naught can part us — not even dying.'

Her face lit up.

'Don't!' said Stephen.

'Oh, you mean it's bad luck to boast. Well, I'll touch 'ood. That's a sure charm.'

'I didn't mean that.'

'Only I wish as we could be together more,' she went on. 'Not you down there and me up here. When you go, mornings, I stop living till you're back.'

He could not understand this.

'And I get thinking — I canna stop — of all the things that met come to you, Stephen. It's like watching your own heart taken off you, and wondering if they'll put it back or no.'

'That's morbid.'

'No, it's only love of you, Stephen. Folks inna frit of losing their second-best brooch, but they keep fingering the best one. I shouldna think as Eli ever loses sleep, longing after God Almighty, like father's done many a time. And Lily never reckons the time till Joe comes back; she's her own best treasure is Lily — and Eli's his own God. But you — Stephen — oh, Stephen! I'm feared when I think as you're more to me than Father and God put together. Every time you're away, out of my sight and hearing, I'm frost-bitten. Then you come in, and it's summer. But I've *been* frozen. I knew what it would be, if you stopped away long — the cold going

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deeper, till it was one of them black frosses, till it went right in, and I was dead. But any minute, if you came back, there'd be summer agen.'

'For goodness' sake, Deb, don't talk like that!'

'I only wanted to say, Stephen, dunna you think you met some time get a bit of a sheep-walk or something — and be at home, like Father is — and look like I dreamt I saw you by the little signpost? A grand flock-master you'd make, Stephen — so big and kindly and all.'

'But what for?'

'So's to take away the daylong sorrow.'

'What sorrow?'

'Being away from you.'

'But I'm back at six.'

'If you was back an hour after you'd gone, the sorrow'd be the same while it lasted. And there's always the fear.'

'What of?'

'Everything. All the 'orld's agen you, if you're fond of your man — when he's away. There's thunder and machinery and runaway horses and a slip on the hillside — it turns me sick. There's so many things set agen lovers.'

'But such things don't happen.'

'Aye, they do — every day. They met happen to you, and me not there. If the rock-crusher —'

She shut her eyes, ghastly pale, then went on with an effort.

'If it caught you, Stephen — how could I get caught, too, when women's not allowed in?'

'Get caught?' he said mazedly.

'Aye.'

'You don't mean —?'

'I mean I'd take the only thing left as I wanted.'

'What?' asked Stephen, in a horrified whisper.

'To be as you was. If so be we'd wake agen, we'd wake together, and if not — what'd it matter?'

He stared at her. This way of loving had never occurred to him. He knew people did it in books sometimes, but it seemed out of place in real life.

'I wish you didn't feel like that,' he said.

'So do I.'

'Then don't. Stop it. Cure yourself.'

'When a man or an 'ooman feels like that,' said Deborah, 'they're not to be cured, not this side of silence. Whether it's God they're in love with,

THE GOLDEN ARROW

or a child, or a man, it's the bones of them and the blood of them. As soon cure folks of breathing.'

Stephen's load grew heavier. He felt tied hand and foot. He was bound to Deborah — and to this place — both because he had married her and because of her way of loving.

He went to work feeling like an old man. From the arms of the trees, as from air-crumbled mummies, had fallen the gorgeous raiment; of all the beauty there remained only grey bones in the chill sarcophagus of the October sky.

Down at the mine the work grew more and more irksome to Stephen. It was too mechanical, too easy. He had long ago mastered it in every detail and it left his mind free. It began to give him the sick distaste, physically exhausting, that abhorred and enforced labour always gives. He worked harder than he need, but the manager would have preferred him to work less and glower less on receiving orders. He was left with one point of light in an infinity of darkness. Joy in work, pleasure, the desire to learn, the sensuous delight of colour, the impetus to righteousness, eternity, God — all these were fallen away like the golden leaves. There remained something stark and cold on which he dared not look.

In all this Deborah's lit window was his only hope — rosy in the night as he climbed desperately towards it, regardless of stumbles and cut knees. And sometimes it came upon him with horror that even for this a black wing waited, ready to fan it into nothingness, as the leathern wings of the Banshee of Wales fanned the lives of men. Whenever he remembered that he and Deborah were tied by an oath by law, he heard the wing rustle like a bat in the rafters of his brain. And now a second bond was on him; he must stay with Deborah every day, every hour, or he would murder her soul. The wings in the rafters rustled again. Deborah might not be able to keep the light shining. If it flickered — if it went out — what then? It was all he had. That gone, nothing would be left to him but panic flight, out of this place, these thoughts, maybe out of this life altogether, or else —? He shuddered, as all sane and healthy people do before the prospect of the gradual chafing of the cord of reason till it should fray to a thread, and at last snap.

Every morning, when Deborah woke him with a cup of tea, made on her little spirit lamp, he saw the sun come like a threat from behind the Chair; every night, as he fetched sticks from the lean-to woodhouse for the morning fire, he saw the stars fall beyond the black horizon like shot birds into water.



CHAPTER 38

ON Saturday afternoon Lily called for Deborah, as it was only a little further to come this way from Slepe to the Clays. She came too early in the hope of seeing Stephen. She and Deborah went arm-in-arm along the ridge, past the brown foxglove stalks which rustled stealthily in the wind, down the wide, bare pastures, through the dark larch-spinney, and into Nancy's garden — now dank and full of stagnant aromatic scent. The yellow afternoon sunlight of mid-October struck flat on the drawn red curtains of the kitchen and the hills of slag — white without purity. When they knocked, Nancy looked from the upper window.

'Oh, it's you. You can come in. Bolt the door after you.'

They entered the hot, dark kitchen, and Lily clutched Deborah's arm.

'And now, my pretty, what can I do for you?' Nancy inquired of Lily, who appeared likely to be the best customer, being more malleable than Deborah. 'Aye, aye, quite private we'll be. You come along upstairs, one at a time, and there's the Word of God for the other to pass the time with, bound in morocca, without money and without price, for I got it off'n a raffle, so I did.'

From above, the muffled sound of their voices came down to Deborah as she sat and looked at a text made of cut whisky corks on the opposite wall. The room was so close that she wished Lily would be quick, and half thought of going without seeing Nancy. At last they came down, Lily scared and pale, Nancy brisk.

'Now that'll be five shillings, my pretty,' she said, 'and that's counting the stuff you'll take whome. And now for you, my dear?'

When they had gone, Lily looked round the kitchen, found a half-pound bag of lump sugar, and began to crunch it.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'Oh, aye,' said Nancy, when Deborah had talked a while, 'it's as plain as sin — the family way.'

Deborah thanked her, radiant, and rose to go immediately, very much to Nancy's dissatisfaction.

'The one downstairs is a sensible girl,' she said, 'and you're a softie.'

She whispered in Deborah's ear.

'No,' said Deborah flatly.

She went down.

Nancy turned her attention to Lily.

'And you'll come again next week?' she coaxed. 'And when you've took that stuff and some more, you'll not be so wissen-faced.'

'Thank you,' said Lily faintly.

'Dunna you take it — leave it here!' Deborah cautioned her.

Nancy was much annoyed.

'It'll be five shilling for you, without the stuff, and you'll be worser and worser afore you're better, and you'll wish you'd come to old Nancy,' she remarked.

Deborah paid her, and they went out, leaving her muttering soft vituperations.

'Well, Lily,' Deborah said, 'I'm thinking it's maybe the same kind of gladsome day for both of us.'

'Gladsume? Miserable, I call it.'

'Naught's miserable, if you and your man's fond of each other, and if you inna, living along of him's a disgrace.'

'Everybody dunna have such queer ideas as you,' Lily replied, rather nettled. 'Whatever will Stephen say, after what he told Joe?' she added spitefully.

'Stephen'll say what's right to be said.'

The picture of Stephen thus conjured was attractive to Lily. How romantic, to be married to Stephen! But there — she must make the best of things.

'What'll Joe say?' asked Deborah kindly. 'Mighty pleased he'll be.'

'They allus tell their husbands in whispers in the novelettes, dunna they, Deb? And then the husband says, "Ah, my dove!" or summat, and the writer says the rest's too sacred, along of him not being able to think of any more to put.'

She wondered what Joe would say. To be like the heroine of a novellette would be pleasant. To hear Joe say, 'Ah, my dove!' would have a thrill of newness in it. Yes, she thought she would tell him.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

'Not as I'm going to have a brat,' she cogitated, 'being as Nancy's so clever. But I can easy tell him afterwards as I was mistook.'

She looked at Deborah rather wistfully.

'Stephen'd say, "My dove," certain sure, Deb.'

'That he never would.'

Lily was taking away some of the glamorous atmosphere that had lain on all things for the past half-hour, that had swept away every thought and left only a flood of light. The reminder of what Stephen had said only a few weeks ago disturbed her. She had meant on reaching home to go and put on the berry-coloured dress and then, sitting in the rosy firelight with Stephen's hand in hers, to bring him with simple words into the light where she now dwelt. She had thought that there would be a long silence, as bits of charred stick fell softly into the white ash under the grate, and the soup bubbled on the fire. Now she was not sure if she had better say anything. She must wait until just the right moment, for if Stephen received her news churlishly, it would be too terrible. She quickened her pace; she was so longing to know if he would be in the right mood.

'Come a bit of the way with me, Deb!'

Lily remembered that the shortest way — down Coldharrow Lane — was lonely.

'I wanted to get back,' said Deborah, 'or Stephen'll be back afore me.'

'You're soft about that chap! Can't a man be left a minute and get his own tea?'

'Stephen's not "a man". He's my man. And he's my lad, and my friend' — Deborah's voice shook a little with suppressed emotion. She searched for a way of making Lily understand. 'And the lover of my soul,' she concluded.

'That's blasphemy, Deborah. It's a hymn.'

'If your man inna the lover of your soul,' said Deborah, as she went with great self-sacrifice down the lane with Lily, 'you've missed the honey and only got the empty comb.'

'Empty nonsense! I'd liefer a man was in love with me in the old-fashioned way. It's a deal more exciting.'

'It's a deal more exciting *my* way,' insisted Deborah, 'for it's only when a man's the lover of your soul and wants you so as he's nigh beside hisself, as you're his 'ooman, right and true. I'm thinking it's only then as you've a right to be called his wife and sleep along of him.'

'You talk very indecent, Deborah, to my thinking.'

'It inna talking straight that's indecent; its smiling and sniggering and colouring up over things.'

THE GOLDEN ARROW

Lily remembered that she must be pleasant, or Deborah might turn back. 'Lucy colours up awful in chapel, if there's anything about births and that. Nasty-minded thing!' she said.

'It's queer that folk never blush about dying,' said Deborah, amused. 'It's a deal more indecent than being born.'

'Would you keep this hat of mine all green, if it was yours?' inquired Lily, who had become bored during the last remark, 'or put some red on for the winter?'

'Aye, a nice warm colour is red — berry red.'

'It dunna suit you, Deb,' said Lily, who had seen and been annoyed by Deborah's unusual and successful daring.

'Stephen likes it, so I dunna mind.'

'You think of never a mortal thing but that chap.'

'Of course.'

'Selfishness, I call it.'

Lily, being a past mistress in the art of selfishness, felt qualified to judge. Deborah was amused.

'Selfish folk as do things for others except Lily Arden, I suppose. I allus thought selfishness was thinking of yourself, and I'm that busy thinking of Stephen that I canna. Night and day, there's no rest but doing things for Stephen, and naught but fears when he's away.'

'What a miserable life!'

'That it inna! But if it was, I'd sooner be miserable and have Stephen than be happy and not have him. Seems to me, loving's like the Golden Arrow — bright and sharp, and him that finds it'll keep it against the 'orld. There's not a many do find it.'

'Such softness, going hunting for old arrows!'

'Well, I mind you was used to be glad enough of an excuse to go along of a chap on Palm Sunday and look for the arrow. But you never found it. I wunna looking for it, and I found it. Well, good night, Lily! I'll be turning now.'

'Take care the arrow dunna prick you!' Lily called after her acidly.

Deborah hurried home up the dim lane, where ghostly honeysuckle waved long tentacles against the cloudy sky, and along the dark ridges, where ever-moaning winds were deepening their lament. She felt that it was all wrong to be unselfish to others at Stephen's expense. If she didn't put him first, who would? It was dreadful that he should have to wait outside, with no tea ready. She almost ran home.

When she arrived, all was dark and silent. Before she reached the

THE GOLDEN ARROW

cottage, she thought she heard Stephen's voice somewhere near the Chair. She called, but there was no reply; then, before she had time to call again there was a tremendous explosion and the rattle of falling rocks from the Devil's Chair. She was frozen with fear. Then, with a cry of 'Stephen!' she began to run uphill straight towards the terror, all fear gone from her.





CHAPTER 39

DOWN at the mine that morning Stephen had heard a thrush sing above a bed of early autumn violets in the manager's garden. He had gone for some order sheets while the manager was at breakfast; and, while he waited, the thrush played on his heart in the yellow wistful light. The idea of death, which every day of autumn had seemed to voice more insistently, which had haunted him since he had been flooded with the sense of nothingness, fled for a moment before the bird's voice. Stephen suddenly knew why he loved lights, colour, spring, song; why men built themselves warm houses and planted orchards; why women made their windows bright with geraniums and clean muslin; why mothers delighted in their babies and young men delighted in football and the zest of love. It was because all these things kept away the idea of death — the knowledge of future intimacy with it; because they built up around the fleeting moment the sapphire walls of immortality. Stephen did not put it in this way, but he remembered how he used to feel sometimes on a holiday, when he and a friend would come on some long walk to an inn at nightfall, and would sit there in the comfortable firelight with a sense of leisure and rest, at home for the moment in a kind of timeless glow, quite forgetting the coming journey in the dark. So the thrush and Deborah's kitchen, and young leaves, and a gallop made him feel. He stood tranced, listening to the sad, tentative music, the aftermath of spring. Then it snapped, as the bird's life might snap before another spring, and only some rusty oak leaves fell on the apple-green violet bed with its few purple buds.

Stephen woke again to a grey world and the voice of the manager, who

THE GOLDEN ARROW

was talking more pompously than usual because his mouth was full of bread and bacon.

That evening Stephen went home faster than ever. In the woods red colour lived but the sad green of the pines. The tongues of fire that had streamed up the hills when all the larches were golden were now almost extinct. At the gate he looked up. There was no light. The cottage looked little more than one of the strewn rocks from so far down; above, like a fortress on the bleak sky, loomed the Chair — unexpectant, imperturbable, sinister.

Stephen loathed it. He knew all about quartzite and its enduring nature; he knew that for thousands of years the Chair had fronted everlastingness while men died like flies, and would front it and partake a little in its quality for thousands more after he himself was dead. He wanted to partake of everlastingness himself — was he not better than a mass of quartzite that he could reduce to powder in the rock-crusher? Yet he stood the rock, smooth, weather-proof, ancient with an age that no other strata for hundreds of miles had attained. It was harder than steel, impervious to fire. It kept in its dark heart secrets of porphyry and silver. The shapes of the bits of sky that shone here and there through windows made by the laying of one rock across two others had not altered by more than a fraction since the Romans mined at the Clays. Such pieces as sometimes broke off and crashed down the slope were only, compared with the pile, like marbles dropped from a palace window. The hills all round — especially the common sandstone — were being worn away: but this wore so slowly that many centuries would do no perceptible work on it. All the way home, in the midst of wondering why Deborah had not lit up, he stared at it with the fascination of horror. And the craftsman in him, the practical manual worker, grew enraged that mere rock should have any power over him. He forgot that material conquest usually means spiritual defeat.

'If only I'd got it down at the mine,' he said to himself, and felt desperate when he remembered what a span of time would be cut from his life before any appreciable portion of it was destroyed. It was not for him, he felt, to lay low such a monument of years. It seemed to him rather, as he looked up at it, as if it were a huge, smooth doom-table on which the death-day of every man in the plain and on the hills was engraved — his own with them. The idea would probably have struck him as ridiculous in daylight or when he was with other men. But those that have dwelt in the majestic reserve of wild places — intolerable to natures that have not as yet found themselves, and being the peace passing understanding to



NORMAN HENNING *fecit*

MUSEUM KAL

THE GOLDEN ARROW

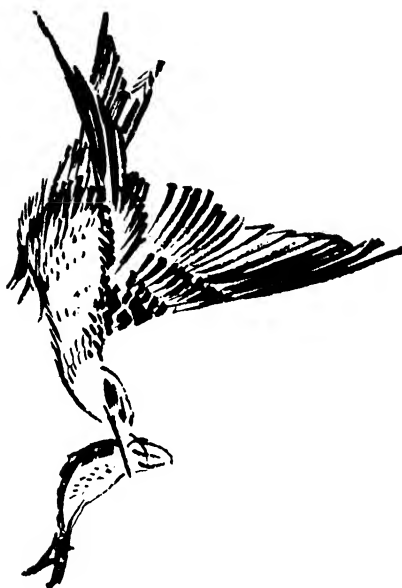
people like John — will know that intuitions come there which cities call madness or genius.

Stephen had, through a curiously timed mixture of circumstances, fallen from the surface of life into the foundations; he awoke in dark, hard reality. Loneliness made a mist around him. He stumbled on in the dying light with bent head and clouded youth, to all appearance a vigorous, sane, though labour-tired man going home to his well-earned rest: but in reality he was one of the few on whom has come the ageless, brain-racking necessity to look into pain, evil, death and the deserts beyond death for himself, with his own eyes, not through the safe and rather misty glass of ready-made dogmas or legends. What would happen to him none could tell; but some change as vast and mysterious as the metamorphosis of sandstone into quartzite must come upon him. He would find in the advancing gloom on the appointed day either madness or God.



THE THOUGHT

As a pale moth passes
In the April grasses,
So I come and go,
Softlier than snow.
Swifter than a star
Through the heart I flee,
Singing things that are
And things that cannot be.
I whisper to the mole
And the cold fish in the sea,
And to man's wistful soul
God sendeth me.
As a grey moth passes
In October grasses,
So I come and go,
Softlier than snow.



THE JOY OF MOTION

'My free soul may use her wing.'

GEORGE HERBERT

THE white grass-root — only a little blinder than the mole, a little less purposeful than the worm — goes softly about her dark house-cares in the close chambers where no wind comes, and sends out her sons with banners. When no breeze brushes the grass, we can very nearly see the multitudinous upward movement of the blades as they slip into the light in their ardent resurrection. When the trees are dumb on summer noons, we can almost hear the sap run. When no tread of man or beast disturbs the silence, we are haunted by the footsteps of the dust — of all those atoms that move invisibly and mysteriously to fresh unions for the building of hills and the hollowing of valleys. On such a day all the ripples of motion are in full flow; the tide of growth is coming in; all green things and flowers hold out their arms to the sun. In autumn the tide

THE JOY OF MOTION

ebbs; leaf and petal look down to the soil whence they came as if they heard a call and longed to go back and intermingle with their kin; softly the petal flings herself down, and the leaf is not long in following. They go, not to death, but to a new incarnation among the unseen company that moves in silence, busier than a hive, creating daily a wonder greater than any myth — the world around us, with its mutable grace.

The story of any flower is not one of stillness, but of faint gradations of movement that we cannot see. The widening and lengthening of petals, the furling and unfurling of leaves, are too gentle for our uneducated eyes. The white convolvulus that flowers only for a day meets the early light folded as if with careful fingers, and dusk finds it folded in almost the same way. You would think that the stillness had never been broken; yet between dawn and twilight the flower's lifework has been completed in one series of smooth, delicate motions. The hour of the pointed bud has been followed by hours of change, until the time of the open blossom and the feeding bee; and even in that triumphant moment a faint tremor shook the spread corolla, and the final silent furling had begun. During the whole drama the flower has seemed stationary — like many spirits that grow from sheath to bud, open golden treasure and close again before our eyes — and we never see.

Watch a bank of periwinkle on an early summer morning. The fresh blue flowers are poised high on delicate stalks, and seem aloof from the leaves. Absolute stillness broods over them; no tremor is discernible in leaf or petal; the wide blue flowers gaze up intently into the wide blue sky. Suddenly, without any breath of wind, without so much stir as a passing gnat makes, one flower has left her stem. No decay touched her; it was just that in her gently progressive existence the time for erect receiving was over. Some faint vibration told her that the moment had come for her to leave off gazing stilly at the sky; and so, in silence and beauty, with soft precipitation, she buried her face in the enfolding evergreen leaves. This pale shadow of a gesture is as lovely, as inevitable, as the flight of wild swans beating up the sky.

In a glade carpeted with wood-sorrel, just before rain, you will be aware of something going on down among the frail companies of leaves. Returning after an absence of half an hour, you will see a difference in the look of every plant. Each triplet of leaflets has softly crinkled toward the stalk, umbrella-wise, and in another half-hour they will be all tightly clasped round it. It is startling to see such steady purpose in so small a plant.

Evening after evening, in the summer, I have gone to see the white

THE JOY OF MOTION

clover fall asleep in the meadows. Kneeling and looking very closely, as the dew begins to gather, one sees a slight change in the leaves; all round the green is paler than by day — when the dark upper surfaces of the leaves are flat beneath the flowers — because the pale undersides are now visible. As the light fails, the two lower leaves on each stalk gently approach each other — like little hands that were going to clap, but thought better of it — and at last lie folded quietly, as if for prayer. Then the upper leaf droops, as a child's face might, until it rests on the others. Everywhere in the dusk the white clover leaves are sleeping in an attitude of worship; those who are early enough may see them wake and rise in the morning — multitudes moving in slow, unfaltering unity.

Unlike the clover, the wood-sorrel and the ivy-leaved toadflax move with sudden violence. The capsule of wood-sorrel opens with a jerk, flinging the seeds a long way in a seemingly erratic manner. The toadflax gives an impression of deliberate thought by the way its seed-vessel turns round on the stalk, seeking a suitable crevice on the wall where it grows, and then dropping the seeds in; it is difficult to distinguish the separate movements, because the flowers are small and crowded, and do not ripen all together.

The thought of this underlying agitation gives mystery to the more perceptible motions caused by the elements. One of the most captivating of these is the ripple of corn. It is so swift, so elusive, that the eye cannot follow it; it is a sea-dream to stand on a little hill and watch the whole countryside in delicious motion, furrowed by the invisible racing shallows of the breezes. The waves wash and break upon the flowery hedges and the remote horizon, and seem ready to submerge everything in their foamless flood. All solid things are made less solid by motion — so grass looks liquid, trees have an aerial magic when the wind is in them.

In summer the willows stroke the smooth water with their long fingers. The supple branches droop until they dip in the stream, and, as they sway, every thin leaf is followed by a vanishing hollow. One of the daintiest joys of spring is the falling of soft rain among blossoms. The shining and apparently weightless drops come pattering into the may-tree with a sound of soft laughter; one alights on a white petal with a little inaudible tap; then petal and raindrop fall together down the steep of green and white, accompanied by troops of other petals, each with her attendant drop and her passing breath of scent. The leaves sit still and laugh, for they know that their time has not come, and the drops slide off shamefacedly and go elsewhere. The young buds laugh in their high places, strong in their immaturity; and all day the rain laughs among the thin,

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curved petals, till the descending drops are like silver wires from the treetop to the grass, and the petals slip down them like white beads.

How different from this spring lyric is the epic of autumn — a west wind in the wood! The leaves have lost their individuality, like a multitude of people on some calamitous day. Wild and reckless companies fly down the rides, beech and hornbeam, elm, ash and sycamore, in strangely assorted crowds — no longer in demure families, each on its own tree. The sound of their hurrying feet comes near, then with wild unreason they turn, desperately flying from the invisible. Before the old west wind that blows from the sunset, the wise wind that knew the Atlantic before a ship was on it, the strong wind that maddens the sea-horses, it is no wonder that the leaves are afraid. The very trees are bending double before it, groaning in the agony of their defiance. The lithe little birches sweep to earth in an ecstasy of surrender; the fir-trees lash themselves; the saplings have learnt obedience — their slender elasticity is at the wind's will; only the stiff old oaks and elms refuse to yield, and ominous crashes tell of their struggle. The live creatures of the wood have hidden from the tumult. The most living things in the place are the leaves; with their scurrying feet and their complaining, whispering voices, they are like an elfin nation, a lost tribe, a defeated army that has forgotten discipline. The sight and the sound of this world-old conflict brings the same strong exhilaration as music does, when it quickens and deepens to a climax.

What new and romantic discoveries await the explorer in the pilgrimages of animals! Mysterious journeyings of fox, badger, weasel and rat; the nomadism of frogs and eels; migrations of those 'water-swallows', the trout; ocean wanderings of the oleander hawk-moth, who, for all her frailty, will venture hundreds of miles from land — these movements, of which we know so little, are not mere restlessness, but planned and ordered comings and goings. We often have one glimpse of them — a weasel runs across a lane from spinney to spinney; a water-rat scurries past upon an unknown errand; a rabbit comes up from his hole upon pressing business and scampers off into obscurity; or a shy little field-mouse creeps from her nest and goes back in a flurry. Most of us have to be content with this, for not many have the unique qualities necessary for watching the free and secret lives of the wild creatures. It is even more difficult to be intimate with birds, for with a flash of wings they are gone in an instant beyond all clues. With migratory birds especially, mystery is the chief part of the story.

All summer you watch a pair of swallows; you seem to be getting to know them, to be nearer their secret. Then a day comes when the

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aspens are beginning to be flecked with gold, long sprays of yellow tansy sweep the water, and in the hearts of the fruited elder-bushes are faint twitterings and gentle flutterings. Looking down into the golden-tinted stream you see far within it the shadows of your swallows, remote and vague, as if the mist of distance had already descended between you and them, and you know that soon they will be only birds of memory, mere flashes of the past, instead of the intimate little friends of your summer days. You can never know to what sun-baked cornice, what warm blue pool or purple-fruited tree they went on those swift wings of theirs. The passage of two birds across the sky appeals indescribably to the imagination. They come from the farthest horizon, flying swiftly high in the blue, pursuing their intent way and vanishing — you know not whither. They go to some far trysting-place, some nest that is to be in willow or darkling fir, some place that their ancestors have known; and we are left with a memory of wings dividing the air and a sense of frustration.

The coming of a dipper up-stream is worth watching for all a summer day. Suddenly, at a far bend, in the green dimness of overarching trees, there is a flash of white. Like a fairy shield, it comes on steadfastly through shadow and sunlight with a smooth and gliding motion, growing larger and larger until the last bright piece of water is traversed on still, outspread wings, and the bird alights gently on a stone.

Few things are more stimulating than the sight of the forceful wings of large birds cleaving the vagueness of air and making the piled clouds a mere background for their concentrated life. The peregrine falcon, becalmed in the blue depths, cruises across space without a tremor of his wide wings. Wild geese beat up the sky in a compact wedge. Primeval force is in their strongly-moving wings and their beautiful, outstretched necks, in their power of untiring effort, and the eager search of their wild hearts for the free spaces they love. The good-fellowship of swift, united action, the joy of ten thousand that move as one, is in the flight of flocks of birds. When sea-gulls flash up from the water with every wing at full stretch there is no deliberation; it is as if each bird saw a sweeping arc before it and followed its individual way faithfully. The unerring judgment of the grand curve when the wings are so near and yet never collide, the speed of the descent, are pure poetry.

In the dipping flight of little birds, such as sparrows, linnets and tits, there is something reminiscent of cup and ball — a very light ball in a very large cup. The bird sinks in the air and is gently tossed up again, dipping continually; yet it flies with arrowy speed. The enthusiasm of

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the process, the buoyancy of the little thing which can afford to spend so much more strength than it needs, make it an incarnation of youth and gaiety.

In spring the wood-pigeon forgets fleet-winged adventure, and flutters, tethered — for he has a treasure. Then, too, the greenfinch is overtaken by happy languor, and falters in her flight, smitten with the April madness.

Bees' wings moving give a sense of absolute ease, because the energy seems so great in proportion to the frail weight lifted. It is restful to watch these creatures, so ethereal of body, so abundantly gifted with vitality — young gnats, the daintiest of dancers, ephemeral and swift, with their tireless measure — hive bees, standing round their doors on a hot day, their thin, airy wings flickering fast, making a cool stir with their noiseless rhythm. Even the great dor-beetles and fluffy bumble-bees — those angry people of the fields — fling their stout bodies through the air with a careless ease that implies immense reserves of power. The dragon-fly, fiery with purposeful energy, flashes over the stream in some long quest, like Palomides. Those small electric-blue insects, that make a haze over water-meadows in June, continue their innumerable dartings briskly in the most swooning heat; but there is nothing brisk in the opening and folding of a butterfly's wings; they are softly and weightlessly sleepy. She comes along the golden day with her faint, continual flutter; her wings make a gentle vibration in the air; from far down the stretches of ripe, brown grass-meadow you watch her approach, and because of her the place becomes Elysium. The white moth's passing is a lullaby; her wings have the elusiveness of dreams as she flickers down the dusk and alights contentedly upon the opening campion.

Movements of which we become conscious through one sense alone bring a strange feeling of secrecy. Owls' flight and all other motions of which we should know nothing with our eyes shut, have an eeriness because of this purposeful quiet; it is uncanny that the strength of those swooping wings should be so utterly noiseless. In a lightning flash, coming in the deep hush after thunder, lies terror; such unthinkably swift and formless motion, instantaneously bridging the abyss of space without a sound, is like some fearful portent. Are our senses undeveloped, since the dramas of dawn and moonrise have for us no chorus; the wind steals by invisible; the stars go through their stately ritual with silent tread, weaving their radiant dances to no murmur of music?

Unseen activity hints of imminent, ungauged power. Isaiah's idea of communion with the Deity was clothed in terms expressing invisible motion. Any stir of life is ominous if we cannot see it, because we are

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left uncertain as to the strength behind it; rustling in a wood on a moonless night may be caused by slight or overwhelming forces. So it is with the wind — that bodiless voice crying in the great spaces of the air, shouting round our roofs and chimneys, sighing at our windows, yelling above the passion of a storm at sea, fluting in the summer treetops. It is like a whisper in the night, when you cannot tell whether a child or a man is speaking; like some creature flapping at our doors in the gloom. We never see the gates of its dark house swing open, nor watch it fall beyond the waters into its tomb beneath the yellow sunset. Every day since the earth was, the wind has sighed and sung around it, gathering up the laughter and tears of all creatures and taking them into its ageless liberty. More mysterious than the invisible wind is the wind that is simply felt, blowing where there are no trees in which to watch it, pressing upon one with tireless, invincible force. There are few things that bring such awe and delight; for it is stronger than a thousand strong horses, shadowless and secret as a god.

Nature sets her dances to every rhythm, from slow undulations to the swift, dangerous rushes that bring wild exhilaration. The long pendulum-swing of trees is restful, not in the unambitious manner of quiescence — that might mean death; nor with a sudden cessation of movement — that might mean injury; but with the content of a return after swaying out from a fixed place, which implies balance and vitality. In the same way a poised mind sweeps out to all new ideas, but is not torn from its place because of its roots.

In this world of swinging, swaying, cleaving, fluttering motion, what is the part of the man who is obliged to be still? It is in his eager mind. Looking from the drowsy room, which is the world of his body, into the stirring life outside, he who longs for the gay kindliness of comradely exertion can project himself into the glad errandries of nature. He can gallop on the wild horses of wave and wind, outspanning his team in the caravanseraï of night. He can pass with the stars on their long marches. He can peer through the soil with growing grass and slip in and out of wet spring coverts with nesting birds. As the doors into physical busyness are shut, more may be opened into the lusty activities of the spirit; and through these doors are vistas of fresh joy — it overflows the very sills like ground ivy. Those who have complete bodily freedom will probably never enter fully into the deep happiness brought by waving grass and running water: but he who has time and who cares to use his imagination, can see in all natural things the bowing down of the creature before the Creator. Perhaps a young larch grows near his window, and

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he loves the strong, elastic swing of the branches. Or he may have a company of Lombardy poplars to watch, and can see them, when he lies awake on a windy night, catching the stars in their green meshes with a sweep like that of a butterfly net. Possibly he can see nothing but sky. Then he can observe uninterruptedly the speed of grey March clouds before their sheep-dog, the gale; the shepherding of white midsummer flocks toward evening; the massing of them for thunder. The advent of the first star, the swimming rose of dawn passing up the sky, the sun's progress in lonely majesty through the great hollow heaven of summer, will mean more to him than to other people. A watcher of the melodic ritual of earth cannot know stagnation of soul; his ideas are fresh and vigorous. Although the healthy quickening of the pulse after exertion, the joy of hard work, may be denied to a man, adventures of the soul are his, along 'the way that no fowl knoweth'. Who can say that such enterprises of an eager spirit may not be nearer to real life — the life of the unknown forces that hold the wandering star and guide the traveling moon — than are the more comprehensible adventures of the body?

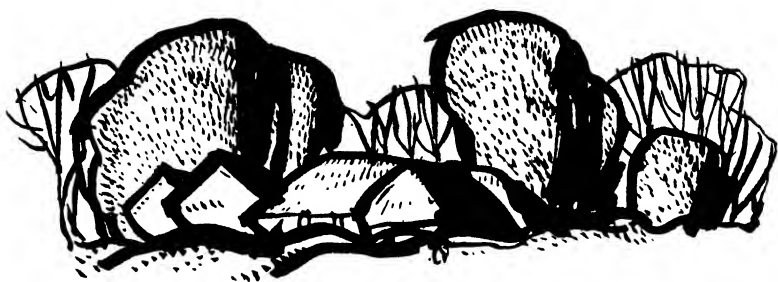
'A gift was given to Brother Bernard of Quintavalle, to wit, that he fled flying like the swallows.'

BEYOND

Far beyond, far beyond,
Deeper than the glassy pond,
My shivering spirit sits and weeps
And never sleeps.

Like the autumn dove that grieves,
Darkly hid in dove-like leaves,
So I moan within a woe
None may know.

GONE TO EARTH



CHAPTER I

SMALL feckless clouds were hurried across the vast untroubled sky — shepherdless, futile, imponderable — and were torn to fragments on the fangs of the mountains, so ending their ephemeral adventures with nothing of their fugitive existence left but a few tears.

It was cold in the Callow — a spinney of silver birches and larches that topped a round hill. A purple mist hinted of buds in the treetops, and a fainter purple haunted the vistas between the silver and brown boles.

Only the crudeness of youth was here as yet, and not its triumph — only the sharp calyx-point, the pricking tip of the bud, like spears, and not the paten of the leaf, the chalice of the flower.

For as yet spring had no flight, no song, but went like a half-fledged bird, hopping tentatively through the undergrowth. The bright springing mercury that carpeted the open spaces had only just hung out its pale flowers, and honeysuckle leaves were still tongues of green fire. Between the larch boles and under the thickets of honeysuckle and blackberry came a tawny silent form, wearing with the calm dignity of woodland creatures a beauty of eye and limb, a brilliance of tint that few women could have worn without self-consciousness. Clear-eyed, lithe, it stood for a moment in the full sunlight — a year-old fox, round-headed and velvet-footed. Then it slid into the shadows. A shrill whistle came from the interior of the wood, and the fox bounded towards it.

‘Where you bin? You’m stray and lose yourself, certain sure!’ said a girl’s voice, chidingly motherly. ‘And if you’m alost, I’m alost; so come you whome. The sun’s undering, and there’s bones for supper!’

GONE TO EARTH

With that she took to her heels, the little fox after her, racing down the Callow in the cold level light till they came to the Woodus's cottage.

Hazel Woodus, to whom the fox belonged, had always lived at the Callow. There her mother, a Welsh gipsy, had borne her in bitter rebellion, hating marriage and a settled life and Abel Woodus as a wild cat hates a cage. She was a rover, born for the artist's joy and sorrow, and her spirit found no relief for its emotions; for it was dumb. To the linn it its flight, to the thrush its song; but she had neither flight nor song. Yet the tongueless thrush is a thrush still, and has golden music in its heart. The caged linnet may sit moping, but her soul knows the dip and rise of flight on an everlasting May morning.

All the things she felt and could not say, all the stored honey, the black hatred, the wistful home-sickness for the unfenced wild — all that other women would have put into their prayers, she gave to Hazel. The whole force of her wayward heart flowed into the softly beating heart of her baby. It was as if she passionately flung the life she did not value into the arms of her child.

When Hazel was fourteen she died, leaving her treasure — an old, dirty, partially illegible manuscript-book of spells and charms and other gipsy lore — to her daughter.

Her one request was that she might be buried in the Callow under the yellow larch needles, and not in a churchyard. Abel Woodus did as she asked, and was regarded askance by most of the community for not burying her in Chrissen-ground. But this did not trouble him. He had his harp still, and while he had that he needed no other friend. It had been his absorption in his music that had prevented him understanding his wife, and in the early days of their marriage she had been wildly jealous of the tall gilt harp with its faded felt cover that stood in the corner of the living-room. Then her jealousy changed to love of it, and her one desire was to be able to draw music from its plaintive strings. She could never master even the rudiments of music, but she would sit on rainy evenings when Abel was away and run her thin hands over the strings with a despairing passion of grieving love. Yet she could not bear to hear Abel play. Just as some childless women with all their accumulated stores of love cannot bear to see a mother with her child, so Maray Woodus, with her sealed genius, her incapacity for expression, could not bear to hear the easy self-expression of another. For Abel was in his way a master of his art; he had dark places in his soul, and that is the very core of art and its substance. He had the lissom hands and cheerful self-absorption that bring success.

He had met Maray at an Eisteddfod that had been held in days gone by

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on a hill five miles from the Callow, called God's Little Mountain, and crowned by a chapel. She had listened, swaying and weeping to the surge and lament of his harp, and when he won the harper's prize and laid it in her lap she had consented to be married in the chapel at the end of the Eisteddfod week. That was nineteen years ago, and she was fled like the leaves and the birds of departed summers; but God's Little Mountain still towered as darkly to the eastward; the wind still leapt sheer from the chapel to the young larches of the Callow; nothing had changed at all; only one more young, anxious, eager creature had come into the towering, sub-luminous scheme of things.

Hazel had her mother's eyes, strange, fawn-coloured eyes, like water, and in the large clear irises were tawny flecks. In their shy honesty they were akin to the little fox's. Her hair, too, of a richer colour than her father's, was tawny and foxlike, and her ways were graceful and covert as a wild creature's.

She stood in the lane above the cottage, which nestled below with its roof on a level with the hedgeroots, and watched the sun dip. The red light from the west stained her torn old dress, her thin face, her eyes, till she seemed to be dipped in blood. The fox, wistfulness in her expression and the consciousness of coming supper in her mind, gazed obediently where her mistress gazed, and was touched with the same fierce beauty. They stood there fronting the crimson pools over the far hills, two small sentient things facing destiny with pathetic courage; they had, in the chill evening on the lonely hill, a look as of those predestined to grief, almost an air of martyrdom.

The small clouds that went westward took each in its turn the prevailing colour, and vanished, dipped in blood.

From the cottage, as Hazel went down the path, came the faint thrumming of the harp, changing as she reached the door to the air of 'The Ash Grove'. The cottage was very low, one-storied, and roofed with red corrugated iron. The three small windows had frames coloured with washing blue and frills of crimson cotton within. There seemed scarcely room for even Hazel's small figure. The house was little larger than a good pigsty, and only the trail of smoke from its squat chimney showed that humanity dwelt there.

Hazel gave Foxy her supper and put her to bed in the old washtub where she slept. Then she went into the cottage with an armful of logs from the wood heap. She threw them on the open fire.

'I'm a-cold,' she said; 'the rain's cleared, and there'll be a duck's frost to-night.'

NORMAN NEEDLE ————— MCMXXL



GONE TO EARTH

Abel looked up absently, humming the air he intended to play next.

'I bin in the Callow, and I've gotten a primmyrose,' continued Hazel, accustomed to his ways, and not discouraged. 'And I got a bit of black-thorn, white as a lady.'

Abel was well on in 'Ap Jenkyn' by now.

Hazel moved about, seeing to supper, for she was as hungry as Foxy, talking all the time in her rather shrilly sweet voice, while she dumped the cracked cups and the loaf and margarine on the bare table. The kettle was not boiling, so she threw some bacon-grease on the fire, and a great tongue of flame sprang out and licked at Abel's beard. He raised a hand to it, continuing to play with the other.

Hazel laughed.

'You be fair comic-struck,' she said.

She always spoke in this tone of easy comradeship; they got on very well; they were so entirely indifferent to each other. There was nothing filial about her or parental about him. Neither did they ever evince the least affection for each other.

He struck up 'It's a fine hunting day'.

'Oh! shut thy row with that drodsome thing!' said Hazel with sudden passion. 'Look'ee! I unna bide in if you go on.'

'Ur?' queried Abel dreamily.

'Play summat else!' said Hazel, 'not that; I dunna like it.'

'You be a queer girl, 'Azel,' said Abel, coming out of his abstraction. 'But I dunna mind playing "Why do the People?" instead; it's just as heartening.'

'Canna you stop meddling wi' the music and come to supper?' asked Hazel. The harp was always called 'the music', just as Abel's mouth-organ was 'the little music'.

She reached down the flitch to cut some bacon off, and her dress, already torn, ripped from shoulder to waist.

'If you dunna take needle to that, you'll be mother-naked afore a week's out,' said Abel indifferently.

'I mun get a new un,' said Hazel. 'It unna mend. I'll go to town to-morrow.'

'Shall you bide with yer auntie the night over?'

'Ah.'

'I shanna look for your face till I see your shadow, then. You can bring a tuthree wreath frames. There's old Samson at the Yeath unna last long; they'll want a wreath made.'

Hazel sat and considered her new dress. She never had a new one till the

old one fell off her back, and then she usually got a second-hand one, as a shilling or two would buy only material if new, but would stretch to a ready-made if second-hand.

'Foxy'd like me to get a green velvet,' said Hazel. She always expressed her intense desires, which were few, in this formula. It was her unconscious protest against the lovelessness of her life. She put the blackthorn in water and contemplated its whiteness with delight; but it had not occurred to her that she might herself, with a little trouble, be as sweet and fresh as its blossom. The spiritualization of sex would be needed before such things would occur to her. At present she was sexless as a leaf. They sat by the fire till it went out; then they went to bed, not troubling to say good night.

In the middle of the night Foxy woke. The moon filled her kennel-mouth like a door, and the light shone in her eyes. This frightened her - so large a lantern in an unseen hand, held so purposefully before the tinny home of one defenceless little creature. She barked sharply. Hazel awoke promptly, as a mother at her child's cry. She ran straight out with her bare feet into the fierce moonlight.

'What ails you?' she whispered. 'What ails you, little un?'

The wind stalked through the Callow, and the Callow moaned. A moan came also from the plain, and black shapes moved there as the clouds drove onwards.

'Maybe they're out,' muttered Hazel. 'Maybe the black meet's set for to-night and she's scented the jeath pack.' She looked about nervously. 'I can see summat driving dark o'er the pastures yonder; they'm abroad, surely.'

She hurried Foxy into the cottage and bolted the door.

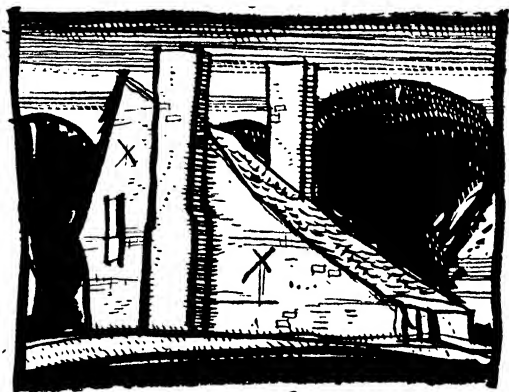
'There!' she said. 'Now you lie good and quiet in the corner, and the jeath pack shanna get you.'

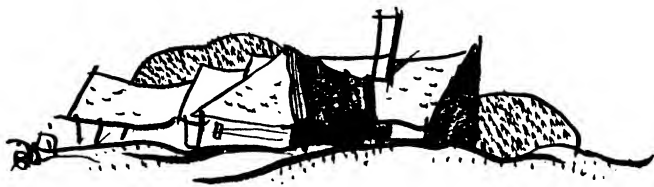
It was said that the death pack, phantom hounds of a bad squire, whose gross body had been long since put to sweeter uses than any he put it to in life - changed into the clear-eyed daisy and the ardent pimpernel - scoured the country on dark stormy nights. Harm was for the houses past which it streamed, death for those that heard it give tongue.

This was the legend, and Hazel believed it implicitly. When she found Foxy half dead outside her deserted earth, she had been quite sure that it was the death pack that had made away with Foxy's mother. She connected it also with her own mother's death. Hounds symbolized everything she hated, everything that was not young, wild and happy. She identified herself with Foxy, and so with all things hunted and shared and destroyed.

GONE TO EARTH

Night, shadow, loud winds, winter — these were inimical; with these came the death pack, stealthy and untiring, following for ever the trail of the defenceless. Sunlight, soft airs, bright colours, kindness — these were beneficent havens to flee into. Such was the essence of her creed, the only creed she held, and it lay darkly in her heart, never expressed even to herself. But when she ran into the night to comfort the little fox, she was living up to her faith as few do; when she gathered flowers and lay in the sun, she was dwelling in a mystical atmosphere as vivid as that of the saints; when she recoiled from cruelty, she was trampling evil under-foot, perhaps more surely than those great divines who destroyed one another in their zeal for their Maker.





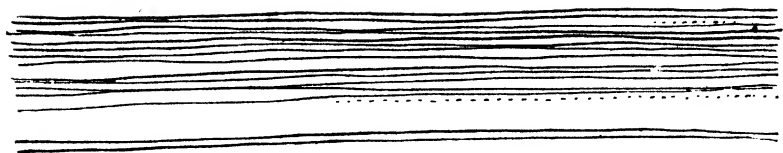
From CHAPTER 21

HAZEL was up early next morning. She could not sleep, and thought she would go down into the valley and look for spring mushrooms.

She crept out of the house, still as death, except for Mrs. Marston's soft yet all-pervading snores. Out in the graveyard, where as yet no bird sang, it was as if the dead had arisen in the stark hours between twelve and two, and were waiting unobtrusively, majestically, each by his own bed, to go down and break their long fast with the bee and the grass-snake in refectories too minute and too immortal to be known by the living. The tombstones seemed taller, seemed to have a presence behind them; the lush grass, lying grey and heavy with dew, seemed to have been swept by silent passing crowds. A dank smell came up and the place had at once the unkempt look worn by the scene of some past revelry and the expectant air of a stage prepared for a coming drama.

Foxy barked sharply, urgently alive in the stronghold of the dead, and Hazel went to explain why she could not come. They held a long conversation, Hazel whispering, Foxy eloquent of eye. Foxy had a marked personality. Dignity never failed her, and she could be hilarious, loving, or clamorous for food without losing a jot of it. She was possessed of herself; the wild was her kingdom. If she was in a kennel — so her expression led you to understand — she was there incognito and of her own choice. Hazel, sitting at Edward's table, had the same look.

When the conversation was over, and Foxy had obediently curled herself to sleep with one swift motion like a line of poetry, Hazel went down the hill. She felt courageous; going to the valley was braving civilization. She had Mrs. Marston's skirt-fastener — the golden butterfly, complicated by various hooks — to keep her petticoats up later on. She also had the little bag in which Edward was accustomed to take the Lord's Supper to a distant chapel. To her, mushrooms were as clean as the Lord's Supper,



NORMAN HEPPLE ————— MDCCLXXII

GONE TO EARTH

no less mysterious, equally incidental to human needs. In her eyes nothing could be more magical and holy than silken, pink-lined mushrooms placed for her in the meadows overnight by the fairies, or by some one greater and more powerful called God.

As she went down the mountain it seemed that the whole country was snowed over. Mist — soft, woolly, and intensely white — lay across the far plain in drifts, filled the valley, and stood about the distant hills almost to their summits. The tops of Hunter's Spinney, God's Little Mountain, and the hill behind Undern stood out, darkly green. The long rose-briers, set with pale coral buds, looked elusive against the wintry scene.

As Hazel descended the mist rose like a wall about her, shutting her off from Undern and the Mountain. She felt like a child out of school, free of every one, her own for the pearly hours of morning. When she came to the meadows she gathered up her skirts well above her knees, took off her shoes and stockings, and pinned her sleeves to the shoulders. She ran like a tightly swathed nymph, small and slender, with her slim legs and arms shining in the fresh cold dew. She looked for nests and called 'Thuckoo!' to the cuckoos, and found a young one, savagely egotistic, not ready for flight physically, but ready for untold things psychically.

'You're proud-stomached, you be!' said Hazel. 'You'd ought to be me, with an old sleepy lady drawing her mouth down whatever you do, and a young fellow —' She stopped. She could not tell even a bird about Red-din. She danced among the shut daisies, wild as a fairy, and when the sun rose her shadow mocked her with delicate foolery. In her hand, and in that of the shadow, bobbed the little black Lord's Supper bag.

She went on, regardless of direction. At last she found an old pasture where heavy farm horses looked round at her over their polished flanks and a sad-eyed foal rose to greet her. There she found button mushrooms to her heart's content. Ancient hedges hung above the field and spoke to her in fragrant voices. The glory of the may was just giving place to the shell-tint of wild-roses. She reached up for some, and her hair fell down; she wisely put the remaining pins in the bag for the return journey. She was intensely happy, as a fish is when it plunges back into the water. For these things, and not the God-fearing comfort of the Mountain, nor the tarnished grandeur of Undern, were her life. She had so deep a kinship with the trees, so intuitive a sympathy with leaf and flower, that it seemed as if the blood in her veins was not slow-moving human blood, but volatile sap.

Hazel, in the fields and woods, enjoyed it all so much that she walked in a mystical exaltation.

Reddin in the fields and woods enjoyed himself only. For he took his own atmosphere with him wherever he went, and before his footsteps weakness fled and beauty folded.

The sky blossomed in parterres of roses, frailer and brighter than the rose of the briar, and melted beneath them into lagoons greener and paler than the veins of a young beech-leaf. The fairy hedges were so high, so flushed with beauty, the green airy waters ran so far back into mystery, that it seemed as if at any moment God might walk there as in a garden, delicate as a moth. Down by the stream Hazel found tall water-plantains, triune of cup, standing each above the ooze like candelabras, and small rough-leaved forget-me-nots eyeing their liquid reflections with complaisance. She watched the birds bathe — bull-finches, smooth-coated and well-found; slim willow-wrens; thrushes, ermine-breasted; lusty black-birds with beaks of crude yellow. They made neat little tracks over the soft mud, drank, bathed, preened, and made other neat little tracks. Then they 'took off', as Hazel put it, from the top of the bank, and flew low across the painted meadow or high into the enamelled tree, and piped and fluted till the air was full of silver.

Hazel stood as Eve might have stood, hands clasped, eyes full of ecstasy, utterly self-forgetful, enchanted with these living toys.

'Eh, yon's a proper bird!' she exclaimed, as a big silken cuckoo alighted on the mud with a gobble, drank with dignity, and took its vacillating flight to a far ash-tree. 'Foxy ought to see that,' she added.

Silver-crested peewits circled and cried with their melancholy cadences, and a tawny pheasant led out her young. Now that the dew was gone, and cobwebs no longer canopied the field with silver, it was blue with germander speedwell — each flower painted with deepening colour, eyed with startling white, and carrying on slender stamens the round white pollen-balls — worlds of silent, lovely activity. Every flower-spike had its family of buds, blue jewels splashed with white, each close-folded on her mystery. To see the whole field not only bright with them, but brimming over, was like watching ten thousand saints rapt in ecstasy, ten thousand children dancing. Hazel knew nothing of saints. She had no words for the wonder in which she walked. But she felt it, she enjoyed it with a passion no words could express.

Mrs. Marston had said several times, 'I'm almost afraid Hazel is a great one for wasting her time.' But what is waste of time? Eating and sleeping; hearing grave, sedulous men read out of grave, sedulous books what we have heard a hundred times; besieging God (whom we end by imagining as a great ear) for material benefits; amassing property — these, the world

says, are not waste of time. But to drink at the stoup of beauty; to lift the leafy coverlet of earth and seek the cradled God (since here, if anywhere, He dwells), this in the world's eye is waste of time. Oh, filthy, heaven-handed, blear-eyed world, when will you wash and be clean?

Hazel came to a place where the white water crossed the road in a glittering shallow ford. Here she stayed, leaning on the wooden bridge, hearing small pebbles grinding on one another; seeing jewel-flashes of ruby, sapphire and emerald struck from them by the low sunlight; smelling the scent that is better than all (except the scent of air on a barren mountain, or of snow) — the scent of running water. She watched the grey wagtails, neat and prim in person but wild in bearing, racing across the wet gravel like intoxicated Sunday-school teachers. Then, in a huge silver willow that brooded, dove-like, over the ford, a blackcap began to sing. The trills and gushes of perfect melody, the golden repetitions, the heart-lifting ascents and wistful falls drooping softly as a flower, seemed wonderful to her as an angel's song. She and the bird, sheltered under the grey-silver feathers of the tree, lived their great moments of creation and receptivity until suddenly there was a sharp noise of hoofs, the song snapped, the willow was untenanted, and Reddin's horse splashed through the ford.

'Oh!' cried Hazel, 'what for did you break the song? A sacred bird, it was. And now it's fled!'

He had been riding round the remnant of his estate, a bit of hill sheep-walk that faced the Mountain and overlooked the valley. He had seen Hazel wander down the road, white-limbed and veiled in tawny hair. He thought there must be something wrong with his sight. Bare legs! Bare arms! Hair all loose, and no hat! As a squire-farmer, he was very much shocked. As a man, he spurred downhill at the risk of a bad fall.

Hazel, unlike the women of civilization, who are pursued by looking-glasses, was apt to forget herself and her appearance. She had done so now. But something in Reddin's face recalled her. She hastily took the butterfly out of her skirt and put on her shoes and stockings.

'What song?' asked Reddin.

'A bird in the tree. What for did you frighten it?'

Reddin was indignant. Seeing Hazel wandering thus so near his own domain, he thought she had come in the hope of seeing him. He also thought that the strangeness of her dress was an effort to attract him.

To the pure all things are pure.

'But you surely wanted to see me? Wasn't that why you came?' he asked.

GONE TO EARTH

'No, it wasna. I came to pick the little musherrooms as come wi' the warm rain, for there's none like spring musherrooms. And I came to see the flowers, and hearken at the birds, and look the nesses.'

'You could have lots of flowers and birds at Undern.'

'There's plenty at the Mountain.'

'Then why did you come here?'

'To be by my lonesome.'

'Snub for me!' He smiled. He liked opposition. 'But look here, Hazel,' he reasoned. 'If you'd come to Undern, I'd make you enjoy life.'

'But I dunna want to. I be Ed'ard's missus.'

'Be *my* missus!' At the phrase his weather-coarsened face grew redder. It intoxicated him.

He slipped off his horse and kissed her.

'I dunna want to be anybody's missus!' she cried vexedly. 'Not yourn nor Ed'ard's neither! But I *be* Ed'ard's, and so I mun stay.' She turned away.

'Good morning to you,' she said in her old-fashioned little way. She trudged up the road. Reddin watched her, a forlorn, slight figure armed with the black bag, weary with the sense of reaction. Reddin was angry and depressed. The master of Undern had been for the second time refused.

'H'm,' he said, considering her departing figure, 'it won't be asking next time, my lady! And it won't be for you to refuse.'



From CHAPTER 36

HAZEL passed the tombstone where she had sat on her wedding-day. She went through the wicket where she and her mother had both passed as brides, and down the green slope that led near the quarry to the woods. The swallows had gone. She came to Reddin's black yew-tree at the fringe of the wood, and sat down there, where she could watch the front door. In spite of her bird-like quickness of ear, she was too much overwhelmed by the scene she had just left to notice an increasing, threatening, ghastly tumult that came, at first fitfully, then steadily, up through the woods. At first it was only a rumour, as if some evil thing imprisoned for the safety of the world, whined and struggled against love in a close underground cavern. But when it came nearer — and it seemed to be emerging from its prison with sinister determination — the wind had no longer any power to disguise its ferocity, although it was still in a minor key, still vacillating and scattered. Nor had it as yet any objective; it was only vaguely clamorous for blood, not for the very marrow-of the soul. Yet, as Hazel suddenly became aware of it, a cold shudder ran down her spine.

'Hound-dogs!' she said. She peered through the trees, but nothing was to be seen, for the woods were steep. With a dart of terror she remembered that she had left Foxy loose in the parlour. Would they have let her out?

She ran home.

'Be Foxy here?' she asked.

Edward looked up from the chapel accounts. James was trying to browbeat him over them.

'No. I expect she went out with you.'

Hazel fled to the back of the house, but Foxy was not there. She whistled, but no smooth, white-bibbed personality came trotting round the corner. Hazel ran back to the hill. The sound of the horn came up intermittently with tuncful devilry.

She whistled again.

Reddin, coming up the wood at some distance from the pack, caught the whistle, and seeing her dress flutter far up the hill, realized what had happened.

'Bother it!' he said. He did not care about Foxy, and he thought Hazel's affection for her very foolish; but he understood very well that if anything happened to Foxy, he would be to blame in Hazel's eyes. Between him and Hazel was a series of precipitous places. He would have to go round to reach her. He spurred his horse, risking a fall from the rabbit-holes and the great ropes of honeysuckle that swung from tree to tree.

Hazel ran to and fro, frantically calling to Foxy.

Suddenly the sound, that had been querulous, interrogative and various, changed like an organ when a new stop is pulled out.

The pack had found.

But the scent, it seemed, was not very hot. Hope revived in Hazel.

'It'll be the old scent from yesterday,' she thought. 'Maybe Foxy'll come yet!'

Seeing Reddin going in so devil-may-care a manner, a little clergyman (a 'guinea-pig' on Sundays and the last hard-riding parson in the neighbourhood on weekdays) thought that Reddin must have seen the fox, and gave a great view-halloo. He rode a tall raw-boned animal, and looked like a monkey.

Hazel did not see either him or Reddin. With fainting heart she had become aware that the hounds were no longer on an old scent. They were not only intent on one life now, but they were close to it. And whoever it was that owned the life was playing with it, coming straight on in the teeth of the wind instead of doubling with it.

With an awful constriction of the heart, Hazel knew who it was. She knew also that it was her momentary forgetfulness that had brought about this horror. Terror seized her at the dogs' approach, but she would not desert Foxy.

Then, with the fearful inconsequence of a dream, Foxy trotted out of the wood and came up to her. Trouble was in her eyes. She was disturbed. She looked to Hazel to remove the unpleasantness, much as Mrs. Marston used to look to Edward.

GONE TO EARTH

And as Hazel, dry-throated, whispered 'Foxy!' and caught her up, the hounds came over the ridge like water. Riding after them, breaking from the wood on every side, came the hunt. Scarlet gashed the impenetrable shadows. Coming, as they did, from the deep gloom, fiery-faced and fiery-coated, with eyes frenzied by excitement, and open, cavernous mouths, they were like devils emerging from hell on a foraging expedition. Miss Clomber, her hair loose and several of her pin-curls torn off by the branches, was one of the first, determined to be in at the death.

The uproar was so terrific that Edward and the six righteous men came out to see what the matter was. Religion and society were marshalled with due solemnity on God's Little Mountain.

Hazel saw nothing, heard nothing. She was running with every nerve at full stretch, her whole soul in her feet. But she had lost her old fleetness, for Reddin's child had even now robbed her of some of her vitality. Fox, in gathering panic, struggled and impeded her. She was only half-way to the quarry, and the house was twice as far.

'I canna!' she gasped on a long terrible breath. She felt as if her heart was bursting.

One picture burnt itself on her brain in blood and agony. One sound was in her ears — the shrieking of the damned. What she saw was Foxy, her smooth little friend, so dignified, so secure of kindness, held in the hand of the purple-faced huntsman above the pack that raved for her convulsive body. She knew how Foxy's eyes would look, and she nearly fainted at the knowledge. She saw the knife descend — saw Foxy, who had been lovely and pleasant to her in life, cut in two and flung (a living creature, fine of nerve) to the pack, and torn to fragments. She heard her scream.

Yes; Foxy would cry to her, as she had cried to the Mighty One dwelling in darkness. And she? What would she do? She knew that she could not go on living with that cry in her ears. She clutched the warm body closer.

Though her thoughts had taken only an instant, the hounds were coming near.

Outside the chapel James said:

'Dear me! A splendid sight! We'll wait to verify the 'apenny columns till they've killed.'

They all elbowed in front of Edward. But he had seen. He snatched up his spade from the porch, and knocked James out of the way with the flat of it.

'I'm coming, dear!' he shouted.

GONE TO EARTH

But she did not hear. Neither did she hear Reddin, who was still at a distance, and was spurring till the blood ran, as in the tale of the death-pack, yelling: 'I'm coming! Give her to me!' Nor the little cleric, in his high-pitched nasal voice, calling: 'Drop it! They'll pull you down!' while the large gold cross bumped up and down on his stomach. The death that Foxy must die, unless she could save her, drowned all other sights and sounds.

She gave one backward glance. The awful resistless flood of liver and white and black was very near. Behind it rose shouting devils.

It was the death-pack.

There was no hope. She could never reach Edward's house. The green turf rose before her like the ascent to Calvary.

The members of the hunt, the Master and the huntsmen were slow to understand. Also, they were at a disadvantage, the run being such an abnormal one — against the wind and up a steep hill. They could not beat off the hounds in time. Edward was the only one near enough to help. If she had seen him and made for him, he might have done something.

But she only saw the death-pack; and as Reddin shouted again near at hand, intending to drag her on to the horse, she turned sharply. She knew it was the Black Huntsman. With a scream so awful that Reddin's hands grew nerveless on the rein, she doubled for the quarry.

A few woodlarks played there, but they fled at the oncoming tumult.

For one instant the hunt and the righteous men, Reddin the destroyer, and Edward the saviour, saw her sway, small and dark, before the staring sky. Then as the pack, with a ferocity of triumph, was flinging itself upon her, she was gone.

She was gone with Foxy into everlasting silence. She would suck no more honey from the rosy flowers, nor dance like a leaf in the wind. Abel would sit, these next nights, making a small coffin that would leave him plenty of beehive wood.

There was silence on God's Little Mountain for a space.

Afterwards a voice, awful and piercing, deep with unutterable horror — the voice of a soul driven mad by torture — clutched the heart of every man and woman. Even the hounds, raging on the quarry edge, cowered and bristled.

It echoed in the freezing arches of the sky, and rolled back unanswered to the freezing earth. The little cleric, who had pulled a Prayer-Book from his pocket, dropped it.

Once again it rang out, and at its awful reiteration the righteous men

GONE TO EARTH .

and the hunt ceased to be people of any class or time or creed, and became creatures swayed by one primeval passion — fear. They crouched and shuddered like beaten dogs as the terrible cry once more roused the shivering echoes:

'Gone to earth! Gone to earth!'



THE PLAIN IN AUTUMN

A solemn land of long-fulfilled desires
Is this, and year by year the self-same fires
Burn in the trees. The untarnished colours keep
The sweetness of the young earth's infant sleep:
Beyond the plain, beneath the evening star,
The burnished hills like stately peacocks are.
Great storms march out. The flocks across the grass
Make their low plaint while the swift shadows pass:
Memoried deep in Hybla, the wild bee
Sings in the purple-fruited damson tree:
And, darkly sweet as Ruth, the dairy maid
By the lean, laughing shepherd is waylaid.



THE CROCKMAN

THE Crockman journeys along quiet lanes and hill-tracks, and as a rule the small market town in the centre of a lonely district is the largest place he ever sees. As his name implies, he sells china — or, rather, rough earthenware, deep red, partly glazed milk-bowls, yellow butter-crocks, blue and white barrel milk-jugs and 'semi-porcelain' cups and saucers such as are used in farmhouses and cottages.

He sells salt too, which is always in demand. A bar of salt, in addition to the huge basket of groceries, is too much even for the strong arms of 'mother', as she starts courageously home on market day, coming first by carrier's cart, which sets her down a mile or so from home. So she is glad to have the salt brought to her door.

A strong float, like a coster's cart, is the Crockman's vehicle. It is drawn by an old pony bought for a song, or by a hill pony broken-in at home. The float looks gay careering along bleak hillsides, down misty valleys, and drawing up with a flourish before the open door of the farm. There is a subdued clashing of ware. If it is sunny, the daffodil-

THE CROCKMAN

tinted bowls and terra-cotta buttermits glow like jewels. The salt sparkles. Willow-pattern dishes shine cleanly. Out comes the Missus. She buys a bar of salt, six pitcher eggs, and a large pot-bellied beer-jug with red flowers painted on it, because the maister's jug was broken last harvest. The bargaining over, the Crockman has a mug of ale, or, if there is prosperation on the farm, a sit-down knife-and-fork tea with bacon and potatoes.

On market day in his metropolis the Crockman renews his stores, spreads his wares on straw in the market, generally in the open air, and from the rostrum of an orange box proceeds to sell them.

When his great voice goes roaring down the busy aisles a crowd gathers — lads with straws in their mouths, old ladies in white aprons and vast brooches of polished stone, girls with butter baskets, shepherds whose calm will probably be undisturbed by Judgment Day, children with gingerbread in their mouths and on their persons.

The Crockman holds up a large willow-pattern dish.

'Tuppence.'

'Fi'pence.'

'Ladies and gents, this is 'eartbreaking! The biggest dish ever I sold! You can put half a sheep on it if you've a mind. Ladies, *if* you please!'

'A tanner.'

'Ten three fardens.'

'Now, now, people all, you're laughing at poor Jack. Ten-three for a dish worth five shilling?'

'A bob.'

The bidding stops.

'The Ten Commandments,' says the Crockman, 'you may forget and welcome. But meanness I cannot abide. A bob for my beautiful dish? People, I'd sooner *break* it!'

And holding it high above his head he sends it crashing on to the pavement.

Who is to know, unless the Crockman tells the secret, that the dish was 'flawed seconds' and only intended for this dramatic moment?

THE WATER OUSEL

WHERE on the wrinkled stream the willows lean,
And fling a very ecstasy of green
Down the dim crystal, and the chestnut tree
Admires her large-leaved shadow, swift and free
A water ousel came, with such a flight
As archangels might envy. Soft and bright,
Upon a water-kissing bough she lit
And washed and preened her silver breast, though it
Was dazzling fair before. Then twittering
She sang, and made obeisance to the Spring.
And in the wavering amber at her feet
Her silent shadow, with obedience meet,
Made her quick, imitative curtsies too.
Maybe she dreamed a nest, so safe, so dear,
Where the keen spray leaps whitely to the weir;
And smooth, warm eggs that hold a mystery;
And stirrings of life, and twitterings that she
Is passionately glad of; and a breast
As silver white as hers, which without rest
Or languor, borne by spread wings swift and strong,
Shall fly upon her service all day long.
She hears a presage in the ancient thunder
Of the silken fall, and her small soul in wonder
Makes preparation as she deems most right,
Re-purifying what before was white
Against the day when, like a beautiful dream,
Two little ousels shall fly with her down-stream,
And even the poor, dumb shadow-bird shall flit
With two small shadows following after it.

SEVEN FOR A SECRET



From CHAPTER 9

SHARP light struck out from the shutterless window of the round lambing-hut, built of turves and roofed with furze by Robert himself. It was warm inside, even without the heat of the rough brazier of live coals resting on four large stones. Shafting slightly upward, the light struck across the frozen grass of the moor, where it sloped towards the sky-rim. The hut stood in a hollow, and beside it was the low roof of thatch supported on larch-boles and surrounded by hurdles, where the ewes were.

Robert sat by the table in the restricted lantern-light, reading a letter. Sometimes he got up and stooped over a lamb, lying dank and limp beside the brazier — come through the door of living, with only just its life. Sometimes, when a low note of pain sounded from the shippen, he would go out, and the wide moor would become an ebony frame for his small round, daffodil-coloured light. Then, sitting down again, he would rest the patched sleeves of his stained coat on the table and muse upon his letter. It was from Gruffydd Conwy, at the Forge Cottage of Trewern Coed, over the border, and it was to invite him to come, on the first Saturday when he was free, and talk with Gruffydd about pennillions.

Robert, who was always practical when this was necessary, counted the ewes that had not yet lambed, and decided that he could be spared on the next Saturday. He was rapturous to be nearing the knowledge that would enable him to cage his thoughts swiftly and permanently. He

whistled and hummed to himself, and sometimes sang aloud, and his voice went tenderly rolling under the grey-moth dawn towards the eastern horizon, beyond which Gillian lay, rosily sleeping in her white nightgown. His poet's heart conjured her: his eyes beheld her: his arms ached for her. Could desire have penetrated that young hard heart of hers, he would have drawn her from her bed, from the house, the town, over the dim fields like a white heron, into his arms. But she was like the maiden in the glass coffin, and not even the faintest tremor of his deep, hidden passion could penetrate to her soul.

He was glad of these nights of watching; they sapped his strength a little, and by lowering his vitality and making his passion less physical, less throbbing, they brought life into better focus, and drew back his peace, as dusk draws again, over the wild sunlight of the plain, quiet folding mist. He stamped the brazier coals to blackness with his nailed boot and went, with a lamb under each arm, along the path that smelt of earth and rime and winter hay, to his mother's cottage.

Standing outside the back door, as his custom was when his boots were muddy, he whistled a blackbird call to his mother, who came hurrying out and gathered the small, ugly creatures into her arms.

'Jim Postman's been,' she said, 'and brought tidings as Mrs. Thatcher passed away last night.'

Jonathan came to the door. He was going to market, and had therefore been shaving, and had therefore cut himself. He stood with the razor in one hand and a lump of rather dirty cotton-waste in the other, looking like a picture of an attempted suicide.

'New folk, new folk,' he said. 'There'll be new folk at the "Maiden" now, and I dunna like new folk. When I catchen sight on a new face I smell trouble.'

'I smell burning,' said Mrs. Makepeace, as she ran to the oven.

'Be that 'am done, Mother?' he inquired with keen interest.

'Ah! It wur in all night. But it mun cool afore we get our teeth in it.'

'We met not live to eat it!' said Jonathan sadly. 'Poor Mrs. Thatcher hasna. New folk! New folk! God 'elp us!'

'Oh, what a poor God-'elp you be, Jonathan,' remarked his wife, peeling the 'rough' pastry from the cooked ham and keeping an eye on the lambs, lest a hot cinder fall on them.

'You mind the tale o' the New Folk at the "Maiden", a hundred year ago,' continued Jonathan, unperturbed. 'Took the place all of a pother. No arglin' and barglin'. No banting of the price. No coddling about with the agent, choosin' this bit o' paper and that bit o' paper for the walls.

SEVEN FOR A SECRET

Took it out of hand, just when the bird's-eye was in flower on the door-sill. Come trooping in, they did; some say as they come by a great coach as nobody ever see in these parts afore or since; but I'm of opinion as they come in a hearse. Howsoever, in they came. And Maister's great-grandmother was the one to put fires for 'em. And it was her and an old ancient man as welcomed 'em. In they came, and went straight to the oak cupboard as is built into the kitchen wall. And one of 'em — a very owd-fashioned-looking gentleman — stooped down and wrenched away the boards o' the floor, as was loose, and they lugged up a great wooden box. Maister's great-grandmother didna know what was in it, only from the weight it seemed to be she thought it wasna money. And with that, with no more ado about it, the four gentlemen picked up the box and heaved it up on their shoulders, and the two ladies puck up each a can'lestick and they took off. But the thing as made Maister's great-grandmother fall down in a swoon was how they went. For they walked straight through the kitchen dresser, plates and cups and all, and through the wall, box and all. And the thing as frittened the old lady worst was the way the blue willow-pattern of the dishes shone through the gentlemen's great-coats. Ah! there's frittenen at the "Maiden", no danger. Much good may it do the new folks, whosoever they be.'

'There isna nobody in these parts as 'ud care to take it on — a wold meandering place the like o' that,' said Mrs. Makepeace. 'I doubt it'll be left for the ghosses for a spell.'

Robert, eating his breakfast, saw the old house left to the ghosts, heard the strange sighings and groanings of a winter's night there, and thought how fair a place it would be if he and Gillian owned it. Never, he supposed, in any place but one like this — half lapsed into Faery — would he and Gillian love each other unhindered. It would be grand to gather her up, angry or laughing, and stalk away with her to the old inn, and to speak a charm, and behold! inn and all would sink into Faery, and he and she — alone of the earth-born — would live there undisturbed, drawing pewter measures of the tiniest capacity full of nectar for elves.

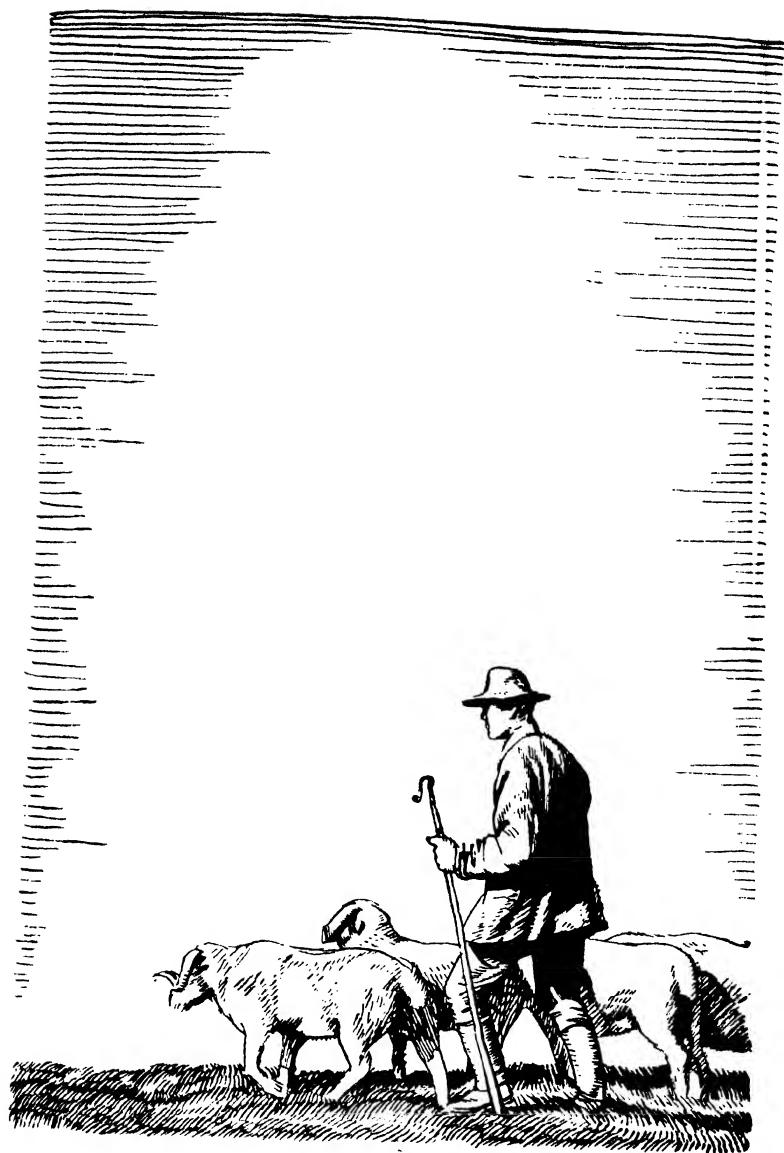
'What'n you chuckling at?' queried his mother.

'Nought, nought,' said Robert, with his mouth full.

'What a lad! oh! what a lad!' Jonathan held up his hands in protest. 'Allus chumbling things over in the mind of 'un, and that forgetful as I never see.'

Robert rose abruptly.

'I'm going to take the day off, Saturday, stepfeyther,' he announced, 'so give an eye to the sheep, oot?'



'What'll Maister say?'

'Maister can say what pleases 'un.'

'Where be going, lad?'

'I be going to see a mon, over the border, Mother. You'll see to the lambs, wunna you — the while I do the jobs?'

He was gone.

'Now what work's he after, going off on lonesome?' pondered his mother. But she knew it was quite useless to ask. For no migratory bird, with its journey mapped secretly in the recesses of its subconsciousness, could be as secretive as Robert when he did not choose to speak. Sometimes she used to wonder whether Robert's father could have made him speak. Then she would sigh; for the older Robert grew, the more like his father he became, and the more absolutely she loved him. In her courting days she had been so dominated by the dark beauty of John Rideout's eyes that she had clung to the door half-fainting when he left her, and in her most rebellious, most loquacious moments he had only to turn his glance full upon her with a 'Well, wench, what ails thee now?' and her heart would, as she said, 'turn in her', and the words and the anger would fall to silence. So whenever Robert did or said anything to remind her of these moments — moments of precious reality not known before nor since — she was grateful, and she would brush aside the wishes of the unfortunate Jonathan, as she brushed the fowls off their perches when they roosted in the wrong house.

So when Saturday came, there was a wallet full of bread and cheese and a bottle of home-brewed for Robert, and he had no opposition to meet but Isaiah's 'Ha!' which, though very loud, was soon over. And at the time when the early bells were ringing in Silverton — for there were two 'high' churches where there was an early service of some sort every day — and when Gillian was putting in the last hairpin and thinking how nice it was not to get up at six, Robert set out across the moor.

The blinds were all down at the 'Mermaid's Rest', and it saddened Robert to think of the stout, gay, motherly woman clinking her glasses no more. He looked away to the little coppice, the unket place, still unket though the snow was gone. A flash of water at its foot, a flash of bright moss-green on its side, a dreaming yellow in its larch boughs where the knops were swelling towards the leaves — why, then, was it so grievous? It must be what he had said to Gillian: evil had broken through there, or would — a horror, strong and fierce as some great beast, would split the solid earth and raven through the land. And again,

SEVEN FOR A SECRET

like a warning bell, came the intuition that he would see it happen, that he must wrestle with something stupendous, even here at the gates of home.

He strode on across the rolling brown of heather and dead bracken and bare wimberries. Plovers mourned softly, always a little withdrawn, and a hawk was present in the air above him for a time, and then was gone. The solitariness of hill and moor in winter is oppressive to some natures. It did not trouble Robert. No voice of shepherd or of sheep, no chirp or lark-song; only the snow-fed brooks rushing over their rocky beds, the plovers withdrawn like souls in trouble, the hawk silent as a leaf. A man's country. Nothing soft or feminine was here to remind him of Gillian, except one white cloud that trailed softly half across the pale sky and had a spring-like presage in it — as if it were made of white narcissus or snowdrops, close packed like market-bunches of flowers. He would have made Gillian a posy like that, if he had been able to marry her, a posy packed so close with sweetness that you could not tell flower from flower (the subtleties of art were unknown to Robert: if he had known them he would probably have rejected them). He would have tied it firmly with strong string and encircled it with cut paper, and it would have been so large that both small hands would have had to hold it. And up the church she would have marched, gallus as a fairy, until she came to him, waiting there, caring not a pin for anybody. And then he'd have turned right round and given her a look, the look that he had to conquer and deny every time she was near him and ten to one she would have dropped the posy plump at parson's feet. . . .

From CHAPTERS 21 and 22

They came through the green places and the brown; they traversed the near and attained the far purple distance, and it melted before them and became the near. Then they saw a long way off, in a veil of rain, the small shining steeple, the low shining roofs — red and brown and blue — the clustered trees, half in leaf, the nestling ricks, the apple-green fields of Weeping Cross. They gazed on it. To her it was the site of a day's revelry. It was a place to laugh in, to dine in, to shy at coco-nuts and look at fat oxen, buy a fairing and come away. It was a place she would have most liked to see in company with Robert; but as she could not, she liked almost as much to see it with Elmer. . . .

SEVEN FOR A SECRET

They came quietly down the steep main street of Weeping Cross, where the shops had, like Jonah's whale, given up that which they contained, and had spread it on trestles and booths. There were gay flowered chintzes and flannels, scarlet and white, and prints for summer frocks and sunbonnets and corduroys outside the drapers'; and wonderful bowls and tea-sets and coloured glass vases outside the china shop; and great leather boots for ploughmen, and elastic-sided cashmere boots for people of eighty, and tiny white or red boots for people of one; there were sticks of pink rock and bulls'-eyes and jumbles that reminded Gillian of the Junction; there were shining black collars with silver or brass hames for carthorses, and brown harness for the ponies of farmers' wives, and reins and riding-whips and spurs; even the furniture shop was a whale, and its Jonah was a lady's antique dressing-table inlaid with shells on a green ground, with a mirror and little brackets.

'Oh! Look's that!' cried Gillian.

'You like that, do you?'

'Ah!'

'It's yours.'

'Oh, Mr. Elmer! You've given me too much! Besides, it's too big for my room.'

'Change your room.'

'They're all little in our house!'

'Change your house.'

Gillian's simple yet subtle mind was much disturbed. Did he mean this to be a proposal or did he not? She changed the subject.

'Oh! Look's that trestle with lemonade and beer. I be so thirsty.'

They pulled up and had some refreshment, served by an ancient dame in a white cap and check apron and fringed shawl, who smiled at everything they said and murmured: 'You're welcome! You're welcome!' but, all the while gazed at them gravely over her spectacles, as if she were reserving her judgment. As if, thought Gillian, she was made up of two people, one merry and one strict, and they never agreed.

Elmer had a striped blue and white mug of frothing ale, and they continued on their way in company with other gigs and late arrivals for the Fair ground in the shape of a drove of sheep and a great mud-bespattered sow with eight pale pink silky piglets.

They drove into the yard of the inn, and Elmer sent Gillian to inquire what time the Farmers' Ordinary was, and if they might sit down to the first table. Then he unharnessed the cob and led him into the great stable where only a faint green light came in from a high, ivy-covered window,

and where the silence was full of the rustlings of hay being pulled down from cratches, and stamping and pawings of shod hoofs on the stone floor, and the deep breathing and sighing of horses. Elmer tied up the cob, rubbed him down, pulled a pair of pincers out of his pocket, took the cob's near forefoot between his knees and wrenched off the shoe. Then he went out, shut the stable door, threw the horse-shoe on to the mixen, and joined Gillian in the hall where she was talking to the landlady. The lady of the inn was a person of so much self-respect that it was impossible to imagine her in any situation that was not supremely dignified. To think of her taking a bath was sheer irreverence. To imagine her being rocked in her cradle, being born, was impossible. If she could not exist without being born then she did not exist. And she would never die, because it was impossible to imagine her laid low, unstarched, and without the slight flush of conscious rectitude. Her right hand lay on an oak table on which were a row of bedroom candlesticks with very white candles, and the impression was given that these candles were the landlady's Vigilance Committee, virginal and austere, who would see that nothing but what was absolutely correct went on in the mahogany-furnished and very highly polished bedrooms.

There were no rugs or carpets in the hall, or the smoking-room, or the dining-room. By the end of the day of the Fair the reason for this became apparent. A thick layer of straw and farmyard manure covered the floors in true Arthurian manner. For it is obviously impossible, when in the throes of bargaining or when meeting a rival from across the border (border feuds are by no means dead), to remember the mat and the scraper. The Fair ground lay at the back of the inn, the street lay in front, and by the end of the day it was not easy, by simply looking down, to tell where you were. The Farmers' Ordinary was already in progress, so Elmer and Gillian went into the dining-room and found two seats at one end of the long table.

It was a huge repast. People such as Isaiah, riding and driving in all weathers, wrestling with great beasts, having huge thighs and sinews to keep up, take a great deal of feeding. The landlady was aware of it. Her sirloins were the largest, the juiciest, the fleshiest in the town. Her fowls were heavy-weights and went in couples, her tarts were each the sepulchre of a whole tree of gooseberries. Only on this day they were bottled — bottled last year with rectitude and competence, and made into tarts yesterday in the same atmosphere, so that each gooseberry seemed to swell and bristle with acidulated righteousness. Everything, from the baskets of bread to the lakes of sauce and gravy, in old-fashioned tureens, was

generous and hospitable. There was a mingled scent of underdone meat, pepper, hair oil, hot fruit, mezereon (with which the table was decorated) and manure. There were a great many farmers, and a few farmers' wives. There were plenty of wild and rugged faces, faces used to fronting the eternal grandeur of the hills, faces becalmed from long gazing into the brown waters of mountain pools. There were a few beautiful faces. Ruddy complexions prevailed, and the eyes of the company were mostly the dark and brooding ones of border-Welsh or the rather choleric blue ones of border-English. The women looked at Gillian kindly. She was obviously out for the day with her lover — either just married, or just going to be, they opined as they glanced at Elmer's face. It would have been difficult to say, as they consumed their large platefuls with their splendid teeth, whether they knew that they were the backbone of England. But they were conscious, as they took their well-earned holiday, which was only business in a new dress, of the wide ploughed acres, the well-got hay, the snug corn-ricks and pruned orchards, the clean floors and the cradles full of babies at home. They liked strong food, broad jokes, primitive justice, safe politics and solid religion.

Elmer whispered to Gillian that it was like a wedding breakfast.

Nobody knew Gillian. Isaiah had steadfastly refused to bring her to fairs, and, on those rare occasions when he took her to Weeping Cross, he had not taken her to the 'Drover's Arms' but to a small, demure tea-shop farther up the street. They knew Elmer by sight, and supposed she was his wife or his betrothed.

Dinner over, they went out to the Fair, where the damp soil sent up a sweet scent in the sunshine, and the fragrant breath of cattle, the hot woolly smell of sheep, the fetid panting of dogs, mingled with tar, oil from the merry-go-round, corduroy, horses, leather, and the ever-present manure, made one great bouquet sweetened by the fresh, eager country air.

A man was sticking bills on the smooth tight bodies of the pigs. He slapped a wet brush on to their sides, clapped down the bill, smoothed it and passed on, leaving the animal self-conscious and puzzled. The sale began, but Elmer forgot his cow. They went on the merry-go-round. They saw the fat woman. They had their fortunes told. Johnson's clan was here, but Johnson himself never came to fairs now. They shied at coco-nuts; they patronized a thimble-rigger. They watched the young men putting the weight, and Elmer tried his hand and did very well. At that, Gillian completely shelved Robert for the day. She decided that she was in love with Elmer. As they stood with the crowd and watched two



'They saw the fat woman'

SEVEN FOR A SECRET

heavyweight policemen boxing, she saw Elmer as the winner and Robert as the loser.

The auctioneer was making the walls of the houses ring with his voice.

'Now, ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to *sell 'em!* They're here to be *soold*. Now's your chance! Take it or leave it! I tell you this' — he lowered his voice to a penetrating whisper) — 'it'll never happen again! Lose your chance now — you won't get it again! I'm here to *sell 'em*. Not next week! Not to-morrow! *Now!*'

'Now!' To Elmer his raving was as the voice of a prophet, prophesying smooth things. He smiled to think how well he had made his plans.

He decided not to tell her about the shoe until just as they were preparing to start for home. Meanwhile he suggested that they should go to the dance which was always held in a large room in the town on the night of the May Fair. And while Gillian tied her hair and borrowed a blouse from the landlady's friendly daughter for the festive occasion, Elmer took the opportunity of bespeaking the room.

'Juliana and I,' said he, 'like a bit of a dance. Maybe the time will fly. We'd best stop the night over.'

'What's she done with her ring?' inquired the lady with a lynx look.

'Left it on the sink when she was washing-up,' said Elmer, and oil was poured upon the waters. . . .

Into the large upper room throbbing with sound went Gillian and Elmer. And there they danced with the rest, oblivious of heavy country boots and the stifling air, until ten o'clock, when some of the men were drunk and some of the women a good deal dishevelled. Now Gillian had given her solemn word to be home at ten. So, when the leisured silver chime crept out from the church spire into the dark blue night, she judged it time to go home. They walked down the narrow street with its cobbled pavements, where the shadows of the gables and chimneys on one side touched the doorsteps on the other side.

In the inky shade of a yew tree Elmer suddenly snatched Gillian and kissed her, holding her close against him so that he could feel the crushed softness of her breast. It was by no means the first kiss of passion, but it was the first nearness of their bodies, and it terrified and intoxicated Gillian. She was wax in his hands after that, prisoner not only to the sudden physical love that his passion awoke, but to her own vitality and to unassuaged but completely awakened curiosity. With something between reverence and ferocity he set both hands on her shoulders and slipped the loose round blouse and the bodice beneath down to her elbows so that

she gleamed palely in the darkness. Then, as she pleaded and struggled, he kissed each shoulder and slipped her blouse on again.

With his arm about her they came to the inn. Everyone was asleep, except the daughter who had been to the dance, and whose candle still burnt in an attic. The great hollow hall, still carpetless, was all in darkness. Only a faint distillation of moonlight from an upper window showed the large curve of the stone staircase, unenclosed and baronial, sweeping up to the railed gallery above the hall — which gallery served as the landing. It was like a picture of a mediæval inn, only there the open courtyard took the place of the hall. On the table stood only one vestal candlestick, and beside it a little placard with the number of the room assigned to Elmer and a request that he would fasten the bolt.

'The cob cast a shoe,' he said. 'I saw we couldn't go home. We'll be bound to stop the night over.'

In Gillian's mind adventure struggled with fear of her father. Still, the adventure was now, the anger to-morrow.

'A' right,' she said.

'There's only one room — my dear.'

In the sifting moonlight brilliant eye met brilliant eye. A vitality greater than their own rushed through their veins and pounded in their breasts. They could no more help themselves than slaves bound for sacrifice on Druidical altars. They were bound for sacrifice on an altar older than mythology: the altar of one who reigns in fold and field, in town and village, in the castle and the hut, who is merciless and arrogant; at once lovely and hideous; who wears the garb of every creed and sect, but belongs to none; who hates virginity; who will be worshipped as long as there remain in the world maids and men; but whose worship is mysterious as the forest, and whose name is unclaimed of any worshipper — for her name is unknown. She has lust in her treasury as well as love; yet, because of her deathless, keen, miraculous vitality, she is clean. And such is her witchery that those who have lived and loved without having known her feel cheated. But those who die in her arms are content as if they already lived in Paradise.

Elmer and Gillian looked on each other as the clear-eyed deer in the forest look — thrilled, yet loveless. Thrilled in every nerve, trembling under the hand of the merciless one, they stood. And white, virginal, the landlady's unlit candle stood. It was to remain unlit. Suddenly Elmer snatched the number of the room, swept Gillian into his arms, and went up the shallow stairs as if he had tasted the elixir of immortal youth. He had no remembrance of yesterday, no thought of to-morrow. An air,

eager and sweet and maddening as the wild air of early morning on a mountain, blew about him — the same that ruffled the hair of Antony in the arms of Cleopatra, of the lovers of Thais, of Paris, and Tristan and many long-forgotten in desert and in forest.

Gillian lay still in his arms, brown lashes on flushed cheeks, passive in a spell she could not break, gripped by a sudden agony of desire. Her heart raced in the silence like a doe pursued through a dark forest. That it was Robert to whom she desired to give herself, she did not remember.

But through the long night, as she lay in the arms of Elmer, faint and weeping, ecstatic, afraid, she would see at intervals against the lightening grey of the window Robert's deep-set eyes, full of anger; Robert's curving mouth, set in wrath. Robert was awake, she knew, awake at the Gwlfas, thinking of her. He was angry because he was robbed. Was it fair that he should be angry at losing what he had not asked for? She was bitter at the thought of it. As the lines of light at the sides of the blind became golden and she knew that morning had come and that she must go back and face Robert, she had the lethargic feeling of those who wake on a day of expected bitterness. And when Ralph woke from a short and restless sleep and took her in his arms again, she was angry and ashamed and scornful. So this was all that lay behind the locked and guarded door that the matrons kept so carefully! This was the secret she had given her maidenhood to discover! No, this was not all. There was no love in it, and so it was a lamp unlit. If Robert had awakened by her side —

At the thought floods of shame overwhelmed her; she lay and sobbed. It was useless for Elmer to kiss her bare shoulders, to let his hands stray up and down her smooth body. The more he caressed her the more she cried. With the wisdom of awakened sex she knew that she loved Robert, that she adored him, because he *was* Robert, that she would rather have his anger than all the gifts and kisses of Elmer. . . .

There was a knock and an uplifted voice without, announcing breakfast.

The carpet was being put down in the hall as they went into the dining-room. The Fair was over till another year. Then once more the carpets would be rolled up, other lovers would dance in the upper room, and lie in the antique bedrooms. Other candles would watch over them or be ignored. Once more, then, the great joints would sizzle in the oven, the tarts and pies be made, the casks of home-brewed broached, the sheep go by through dust or mud with a leafy rustling, the bargains be driven, the purchases made. But now the Fair was over. The shops had with-

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drawn within their windows; the hobby-horses were packed on their wagon; Johnson's clan had set out for the mountains, not to return until the autumn; the little old woman with the striped blue and white mugs and the spectacles, who was half merry and half strict, had withdrawn into mystery for another year. And everything was the same as it had been the day before yesterday.

THE VAGRANT

Who came so close then? —
Brushed the wet lilac into rellow laughter;
Set the smooth blackbird at his golden weaving
Making no stir at all, no foot-print leaving;
Travelling westward, all things following after?

Who whispered secrets? —
Tempted the worm up from her winter hiding
To lie her length in the rail of early summer?
Who cut the leaf-buds open? What new-comer
Told the tall heron the place of her abiding?

Some one has been here:
Not the rough, drunken wind who shouts and wanders,
Trampling the woodpath; neither dawn nor gloaming
Nor the young airs in cowslip-garlands roaming.
Who was it then? The muted spirit ponders.

Close by the water
Wrapt in a dream, I saw a faint reflection
Like a wayfarer, calm and worn of features,
Clad in the brown of leaves and little creatures,
Stern as the moorland, russet of complexion.

Dark in the shadow
Fathomless eyes met mine with thought unspoken,
Wistful, yet deep within them laughter lingered.
With sunburnt hands a wooden flute he fingered
Under the thorn-tree, where the lights are broken.

Then the green river
Dimmed like a misted mirror; blossom only
Whitened it, on the covert water lying.
Westward along the willows ran a sighing.
Herd-like the clouds went home and left me lonely.

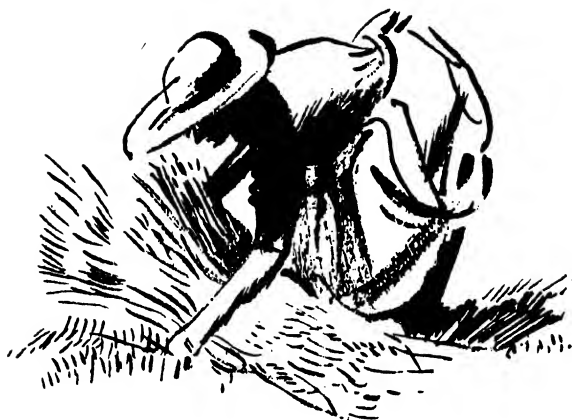
THE VAGRANT

Over the meadows
Wild music came like spray upon the shingle;
Piping the world to mating; changing, calling
Low to the heart like doves when rain is falling.
Surely he cut his flute in Calvary's dingle?

I rose and followed
Right to the sunset-bars, yet never found him.
Backward along the edge of night returning
Sadly, I watched the slip of moon upburning
Silver, as if she drank the life around him.

In the dark aspens
Hark! a flute note; so still he's at his playing.
Tawny the furrows lie — his homely vesture.
Labourers pass: I see his very gesture —
Vigorous, tranquil, with his music straying.

• Now I know surely
Who set the birds a-fire and touched the grasses —
Silent, without a footprint, no shade throwing.
Infinite worlds his shadow: all things growing
Stir with his breathing, follow as he passes.



FRUITS OF THE EARTH

ON a bright, rook-haunted September morning, in the wide upland pastures where kestrels scream and the sheep cry across the dew, it is good to be astir very early. Then the rabbits and the young foxes are playing in the shadow at the wood's edge, magpies in the tall trees are calling to one another in their harsh voices, and the woodpecker's laughing note re-echoes. Every grass-blade and hedge, and the long, purple-jewelled blackberry vines are hung with white cobwebs sewn with diamonds, like elfin awnings. Even in October, when the last bee is gone and the fruits are sodden and frosted, the blackberry is lovely with leaves that burn from yellow to crimson. Not many scents are so rich, so racy of the soil, as the scent of blackberries and wimberries.

Of all wild fruits the wimberry, or cloud-berry, should rank first. Its colour is the bloomy purple of distant hills. It tastes of Faery. It will grow only in beautiful and mysterious places. High on the airy hill, far from any sound of village or hamlet, voice or bell — except the voice of the shepherd and the sheep-bell's silver tinkle — is the chosen haunt of the wimberry. Countless acres are covered with the neat, shining bushes, tall beside the streams, lowly on the summits. In spring, the leaf green is splashed with a beautiful red, like the colour of a ladybird; then come pink flowers, honeyed and waxen, and above their sweet acres the large, almost black bumble-bees of the hills coast to and fro with their deep murmur, like far-

FRUITS OF THE EARTH

off seas in a dream. At the end of June, when young curlews run among the bushes, like yellow chickens pencilled with brown, the fruit begins to ripen, but it is not often ready for picking until after Saint Swithun's. From that date until late September a tide of life, gipsy and cottager and dweller in the plain, flows up into our hills. To the Stiperstones, to the Longmynd, to the wild, lonely stretches of Clun Forest, come the stooping, neutral-tinted figures — the lads with their little home-made trucks, the wise babies whose wimberry-picking is not yet, and whose task is simply to be good. Alone beside the family kettle amid the day's provisions he sits, the baby, smiling, gazing trustfully at the blue, arching sky, so deeply saturated with wimberry juice that one doubts if many Saturday tubs will clean him. He achieves the end and aim of his day: he is good. On every side of him stretch the purple plateaux, dotted with busy figures. Here and there, at a lost signpost or a mountain ash, is the trysting-place of the wimberry higgler. Twice a week he appears with his cart and his rough pony, and over the green, deeply rutted tracks, down valleys brimful of shadow and along precipitous roads, the wimberries go on their journey to the cities of England.

Cranberries grow on some of our hills, but sparsely, in crevices of the black rock and on bare summits. The polished leaves, the waxen-white blossoms, the large coral-tinted berries, glow on their sombre background like richly coloured statues of saints and Madonnas set up in sorrowful places. Under grieved autumn skies, amid bitter juniper and withered heather and riven rock, they achieve the beauty which is at once delicate and hardy, and they bless the gaunt solitudes where only the anxious sheep lift amber eyes as the cranberry picker passes, and only the hovering kestrel and the peregrine falcon, dark upon the driving sky, look down.

In the plain, when the winter strips the hedges and the honeysuckle has not yet sent out her bright pairs of leaves, the fruited blackthorn reigns. She is a creature of dark weather. From her first adventure into a cold March world, with her gift of sweet, golden-anthered blossom, to her wintry ripening, she has no kinship with the luxurious daughters of summer. Not for her the slow-falling, scarlet fruit of August: but when the cherry and the apple have laid aside their beauty, she sets her black twigs with bloomy, purple fruit, austere yet gorgeous. The berries give the impression of melting the frost by their rich warmth, and there is no fruit-gathering that brings more zest than the gathering of the sloe in the whistling hedges with a robin for company.

The fruit of the spindle-tree has a strangeness and an ancientry in its down-hanging, petalled cup of deep rose and orange. A tall, slender

FRUITS OF THE EARTH

spindle set with shining pink lamps makes an exquisite, almost an exotic picture on a white-frost morning. No one plants the spindle now, but it must have been one of the October beauties of the countryside when in every home the busy hum of the spinning-wheels filled the fire-lit evening. It is to be found to-day in old woods and in hedges that have, with the lapse of time, ceased to be hedges and become groves of trees. Soon, perhaps, it will be gone, like the sweet faces, the little hands, that once watched and tended the whispering wheels.

Once a year the elder attains perfect beauty. She paints her leaves with a pale rose, primrose and gold, crimson and violet, and sets forth her fruit like elfin grapes. Then every elder is full of little wings, and shrill with small, thankful bird-notes. If there come a rainy day, the elder hangs beneath every purple berry a silver berry. Then woods grow vague : in the thickened atmosphere, the courses of the streams are marked in mist, and on the first morning of sharp frost the painted curtains of the elder fall upon the grass.

It was in clear October weather, in a green valley beneath a steep, dark mountain, that I found the long avenue of fruited rowans growing on either side of a half-obliterated road where once marched the Romans. The trunks were gnarled and riven, but the trees stood against the hill, beneath the egg-shell sky, in the vital colours of youth. And all about them, like angels in a picture, hovered creatures winged with bright black and pale silver, creatures too eerily fair to be only blackbirds and thrushes. They seemed like spirits bound to the trees by a charm; and indeed the whole valley was bewitched, far gone in spells.

And so we come to the yew — the yew, that sets beneath her brooding branches a fruit vivid and unearthly, startling the eye inured to darkness with sudden living red as if she lit, for comfort in the night, above the cold sleepers in her keeping, a galaxy of burning hearts.

THE ELF

A fair town is Shrewsbury —
The world over
You'll hardly find a fairer,
In its fields of clover
And rest-harrow, ringed
By hills where curlews call,
And, drunken from the heather,
Black bees fall.
Poplars, by Severn,
Lean hand in hand,
Like golden girls dancing
In elfland.

Early there come travelling
On market day
Old men and young men
From far away,
With red fruits of the orchard
And dark fruits of the hill,
Dew-fresh garden stuff,
And mushrooms chill,
Honey from the brown skep,
Brown eggs, and posies
Of gillyflowers and Lent lilies
And blush roses.

And sometimes, in a branch of blossom,
Or a lily deep,
An elf comes, plucked with the flower
In her sleep;
Lifts a languid wing, slow and weary,
Veined like a shell;
Listens, with eyes dark and eerie,
To the church bell;

THE ELF

Creeps further within her shelter
Of lilac or lily,
Weaving enchantments,
Laughing stilly.

Neither bells in the steeple
Nor books, old and brown,
Can disenchant the people
In the slumbering town.

PRECIOUS BANE



CHAPTER 4

It was a still, dewy summer night when we buried Father. In our time there was still a custom round about Sarn to bury people at night. In our family it had been done for hundreds of years. I was busy all day decking the waggon with yew and the white flowering laurel, that has such a heavy, sweet smell. I pulled all the white roses and a tuthree pinks that were in blow, and made up with daisies out of the hay grass. While I pulled them, I thought how angered Father would have been to see me there, trampling it, and I could scarcely help looking round now and again to see if he was coming.

After we'd milked, Gideon went for the beasts, and I put black streamers round their necks, and tied yew boughs to their horns. It had to be done carefully, for they were the Longhorn breed, and if you angered them, they'd hike you to death in a minute.

The miller was one bearer, and Mister Callard, of Callard's Dingle, who farmed all the land between Sarn and Plash, was another. Then there were our two uncles from beyond the mountains.

Gideon, being chief mourner, had a tall hat with black streamers and black gloves, and a twisted black stick with streamers on it. They took a

long while getting the coffin out, for the doors were very narrow and it was a big, heavy coffin. It had always been the same at all the Sarn funerals, yet nobody ever seemed to think of making the doors bigger.

Sexton went first with his hat off and a great torch in his hand. Then came the cart, with Miller's lad and another to lead the beasts. The waggon was mounded up with leaves and branches, and they all said it was a credit to me. But I could only mind how poor Father was used to tell me to take away all those nasty weeds out of the house. And now we were taking him away, jolting over the stones, from the place where he was maister. I was all of a puzzle with it. It did seem so unkind, and disrespectful as well, leaving the poor soul all by his lonesome at the other end of the mere. I was glad it was sweet June weather, and not dark.

We were bound to go the long way round, the other being only a foot road. When we were come out of the fold-yard, past the mixen, and were in the road, we took our places — Gideon behind the coffin by himself, then Mother and me in our black poke bonnets and shawls, with Prayer Books and branches of rosemary in our hands. Uncles and Miller and Mister Callard came next, all with torches and boughs of rosemary.

It was a good road, and smoother than most — the road to Lullingford. Parson used to say it was made by folk who lived in the days when the Redeemer lived. Romans, the name was. They could make roads right well, whatever their name was. It went along above the water, close by the lake; and as we walked solemnly onwards, I looked into the water and saw us there. It was a dim picture, for the only light there was came from the waning, clouded moon, and from the torches. But you could see, in the dark water, something stirring, and gleams and flashes, and when the moon came clear we had our shapes, like the shadows of fish gliding in the deep. There was a great heap of black, that was the waggon, and the oxen were like clouds moving far down, and the torches were flung into the water as if we wanted to dout them.

All the time, as we went, we could hear the bells ringing the corpse home. They sounded very strange over the water in the waste of night, and the echoes sounded yet stranger. Once a white owl came by, like a blown feather for lightness and softness. Mother said it was Father's spirit looking for its body. There was no sound but the bells and the creaking of the wheels, till Parson's pony, grazing in the glebe, saw the dim shapes of the oxen a long way off, and whinnied, not knowing, I suppose, but what they were ponies too, and being glad to think, in the lonesomeness of the night, of others like herself near by.

At last the creaking stopped at the lych-gate. They took out the coffin,

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resting it on trestles, and in the midst of the heavy breathing of the bearers, came the promising words —

'I am the resurrection and the life.'

They were like quiet rain after drought. Only I began to wonder, how should we come again in the resurrection? Should we come clear, or dim, like in the water? Would Father come in a fit of anger, as he'd died, or as a little boy running to Grandma with a bunch of primmyroses? Would Mother smile the same smile, or would she have found a light in the dark passage? Should I still be fast in a body I'd no mind for, or would they give us leave to weave ourselves bodies to our own liking out of the spinnings of our souls?

The coffin was moved to another trestle, by the graveside, and a white cloth put over it. Our best tablecloth, it was. On the cloth stood the big pewter tankard full of elderberry wine. It was the only thing Mother could provide, and it was by good fortune that she had plenty of it, enough for the funeral feast and all, since there had been such a power of elderberries the year afore. It looked strange in the doubtful moonlight, standing there on the coffin, when we were used to see it on the table, with the colour of the Christmas Brand reflected in it.

Parson came forrard and took it up, saying —

'I drink to the peace of him that's gone.'

Then everybody came in turn, and drank good health to Father's spirit.

At the coffin foot was our little pewter measure full of wine, and a crust of bread with it, but nobody touched them.

Then Sexton stepped forrard and said —

'Be there a Sin Eater?'

And Mother cried out —

'Alas, no! Woe's me! There is no Sin Eater for poor Sarn. Gideon gainsayed it.'

Now it was still the custom at that time, in our part of the country, to give a fee to some poor man after a death, and then he would take bread and wine handed to him across the coffin, and eat and drink, saying —

I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man, that ye walk not over the fields nor down the by-ways. And for thy peace I pawn my own soul.

And with a calm and grievous look he would go to his own place. Mostly, my Grandad used to say, Sin Eaters were such as had been Wise Men or layers of spirits, and had fallen on evil days. Or they were poor folk that had come, through some dark deed, out of the kindly life of men, and with whom none would trade, whose only food might oftentimes be the bread and wine that had crossed the coffin. In our time there were

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none left around Sarn. They had nearly died out, and they had to be sent for to the mountains. It was a long way to send, and they asked a big price, instead of doing it for nothing as in the old days. So Gideon said —

‘We’ll save the money. What good would the man do?’

But Mother cried and moaned all night after. And when the Sexton said ‘Be there a Sin Eater?’ she cried again very pitifully, because Father had died in his wrath, with all his sins upon him, and besides, he had died in his boots, which is a very unket thing and bodes no good. So she thought he had great need of a Sin Eater, and she would not be comforted.

Then a strange, heart-shaking thing came to pass.

Gideon stepped up to the coffin and said —

‘There *is* a Sin Eater.’

‘Who then? I see none,’ said Sexton.

‘I ool be the Sin Eater.’

He took up the little pewter measure full of darkness, and he looked at Mother.

‘Oot turn over the farm and all to me if I be the Sin Eater, Mother?’ he said.

‘No, no! Sin Eaters be accurst!’

‘What harm, to drink a sup of your own wine and chumble a crust of your own bread? But if you dunna care, let be. He can go with the sin on him.’

‘No, no! Leave un go free, Gideon! Let un rest, poor soul! You be in life and young, but he’m cold and helpless, in the power of Satan. He went with all his sins upon him, in his boots, poor soul! If there’s none else to help, let his own lad take pity.’

‘And you’ll give me the farm, Mother?’

‘Yes, yes, my dear! What be the farm to me? You can take all, and welcome.’

Then Gideon drank the wine all of a gulp, and swallowed the crust. There was no sound in all the place but the sound of his teeth biting it up.

Then he put his hand on the coffin, standing up tall in the high black hat, with a gleaming pale face, and he said —

‘I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man. Come not down the lanes nor in our meadows. And for thy peace I pawn my own soul. Amen.’

There was a sigh from everybody then, like the wind in dry bents. Even the oxen by the gate, it seemed to me, sighed as they chewed the cud.

But when Gideon said, ‘Come not down the lanes nor in our meadows,’ I thought he said it like somebody warning off a trespasser.

Now it was time to throw the rosemary into the grave. Then they

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lowered the coffin in, and all threw their burning torches down upon it, and douted them.

It was over at long last, and we went home by the shortest way, only Gideon going by the road with the waggon. We were a tidy few, for all that had been at the church came back for the funeral feast. There was the smith, and the ox-driver from Plash Farm, and the shepherd from the Mountain, and the miller's man and a good few women, as well as those I spoke of afore.

Mother had asked Tivvy to mind the fire and see to the kettles for making spiced ale and posset, for the air struck chill along the water at that time of night.

When we raught home there was Missis Beguildy as well, and Jancis. They had a nice gledy fire, and the horn of ale set upon it all ready. She was a kind soul, Missis Beguildy, but sorely misliked through being the wife of a wizard, a preached-against man. She was never invited to weddings nor baptisms. But at a burying, when the harm's on the house already, what ill can anybody do? Missis Beguildy dearly loved an outing. She'd have liked to live in Lullingford and keep a shop, and go to church twice of a Sunday, and sing in the choir. She'd no faith at all in her good-man's spells, though she never said so, except to me and a tuthree she knew well. Once, a long while after this, when there'd been trouble at the Stone House, which you'll hear of in good time, when she'd quarrelled with Beguildy, I went in by chance and found her with Lady Camperdine's bottle (in which he said he'd got the old lady's ghost), shaking it as if it was an ill-mixed sauce, so that I thought the cork would come out, and shouting, 'I'll learn ye! I'll learn ye! Lady Camperdine indeed! Plash water! That's what's in this here bottle. Plash water and nought else.'

It was seldom anybody saw Missis Beguildy. She was always out with the fowl or the ducks, or digging the garden, or fishing. She was a good fisherwoman. If it hadna been for her, they'd have clemmed, for Beguildy never reckoned to do anything but wizardry. She'd baked us a batch of funeral cakes in case we hadna enough, and she was so kind and comely, being fair, like Jancis, and plump, and the posset she made was so good, that everybody forgot she was the wizard's wife, even Parson.

'I'm to take back the cattle, my dear,' she said to Mother; 'hay harvest, we use 'em a deal.'

'Bin you started?'

'Ah. Bin you?'

'I start to-morrow,' said Gideon.

Everybody looked at him, tall in the doorway, with a kind of power in

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him. And it seemed to me that everybody drew away a bit, as if from summat untoert.

Parson got up to go.

'It's to-morrow now, young Sarn,' he said. 'See you do well in it, and in all the to-morrows.'

'To-morrow! O to-morrow!' said Jancis. 'It be a word of promise'

She yawned, and all in a minute her mouth was a rose, and I knew I couldna abide her.

'One song!' Sexton spoke very solemn. 'One holy song afore we part'

So we stood up about the table, where the twelve candles were guttering low, and we sang —

*With a turf all at your head, dear man,
And another at your feet,
Your good deeds and your bad ones all
Before the Lord shall meet.*

There being a sight more men than women, the song sounded deep, like bees in a lime-tree. Jancis and Tivvy sang very clear and high, and cold too, as if they didna mind at all that the poor corpse lay out yonder with only turfs for company.

Then there was a trampling and a traversing, and they all went out, Mother standing by the door the while, doling out the funeral cakes. These were made of good sponge, with plenty of eggs, coffin-shaped and lapped up in black-edged paper.

By this the birds were singing very loud and clear, with a ringing, echoing noise. Our chimneys lay in the mere, which meant that it was sunrise. There was a cuckoo in the oak wood, and the first corncrake spoke up from the hay grass, very masterful.

Gideon said —

'It be too late for sleep now. To-morrow be come. Let's go down into the orchard. I want to tell you what I've planned out.'

Little did I think, as I followed him down into the orchard, where was neither blossom nor fruit, what those plans were to mean for us all.

From BOOK II, CHAPTERS I and 2

I was up at four on market day, setting the place to rights for Mother and getting the things together for market. Eggs and dressed fowl we had in plenty, and greens and apples and a bit of butter. Polishing the apples

in the attic, peace came upon me, as it ever did up there, since the time I told of. While the rushlight flickered in the cold air, and the mice scuttled, I stood at the open window that was like an oblong of black paper. No sound came in. Nought stirred outside. Even the mere was frozen round the edges, so that the ducks must go skating every morning afore they could come at the water. The world was all so piercing still that it was almost like a voice crying out. It was used to seem to me that when the world was so quiet, it was like being along of somebody as knew you very well, ah! like being with your dear acquaintance.

Down in the dark barn the cock crew, thin and sweet, and I thought it sounded like no earthly bird; but maybe that was because I was in the attic, where things were always new. You may think it strange that a woman like me should think such things, being one that worked with my hands always, at poor harsh tasks, whereas you'd expect such thoughts to come to fine ladies sitting at their tapestry work. But I was so lonesome, and had such a deal of time for thinking, and what with that and the book-learning I was getting, all sorts of thoughts grew up in my mind, like flowering rushes and forget-me-nots coming into blow in a poor marshy place, that else had nought. And I can never see that it did much harm, for the thoughts seldom came but in the attic, and they did never make me dreamy over my work.

So now, hearing the clear sound of our game-cock crying out upon the dawn, that was yet more than two hours away, I ran downstairs all of a lantun-puff to get the breakfast. When Gideon came in, it was all ready, and a great fire roaring, for we need never stint of wood at Sarn, which was much to be thankful for at a time when many poor families in England must herd together six or seven in one cottage to boil their kettles all on one fire. I was always thankful for our plenteous wood, that cost nought, and need not take up too much of Gideon's time neither, for if I burnt more than he cut I could make shift to chop it myself.

We were as snug as could be, sitting in the merry firelight with a red glow shining on the quarries and the ware and the spinning-wheels in the corner. I was pleased to think Mother wasna to be lonesome, for I'd asked Tivvy to come and keep her company, since I never could enjoy anything if one I loved was lonesome or sad. Shaking the cloth out of the door after it got light, I could see her red cloak coming along under the dark woods; for as Tivvy never did anything nor thought anything, she had all her time to herself, as you met say, and so she had no cause to be late.

Gideon had roughed Bendigo and the mill pony overnight, so all being ready and the sun just risen, we set off.

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All the lake was full of red lights, as if our farm was on fire, reflected in the water. The black pines stood with their arms out, dripping with hoar frost, all white-over, so that the tips of their drooping branches were like your fingers when you take them from the suds. The rooks were very contented, cawing soft and pleasant, as if they knew their breakfast was ready so soon as our ploughland thawed a bit, and in the stackyard there was a great murmur of starlings.

'Bring me a fairing!' screams Tivvy from across the water.

Gideon looked sullen, and I knew that only fairing he'd a mind to bring was one for Jancis. So I called out —

'I will. What shall it be?'

'A bit of cherry-coloured sarsnet to tie up my hair,' she calls. For though she was a foolish piece in most things, she knew very well she'd got pretty curls, bright brown and thick. She'd toss them ever so when Gideon was there, and take every chance to miscall Beguildy, though she durstna say anything against Jancis, for fear Gideon might blaze out. But she was clever enough in this, as oftentimes a stupid girl is when she's in love, and she could always make it seem a very poor, ill-liking sort of thing to be sweet on a wizard's wench, and a grand thing to be in love with the sexton's daughter, whose dad could mouth texts as fast as the wizard could mouth charms.

It was a grand morning, very crispy underfoot, with moor-fowl about, especially widgeon. We were riding to the hills. Across the far woods and the rough moors beyond, and the bits of ploughland here and there, and the frosty stubble where partridges ran from the noise of the trotting, we could see the hills, as blue as pansies. Promising hills, they seemed to me. There was a clatter in the spinney, and a flock of wood-pigeons got up and took their flight, with wings flashing blue in the sun, for the same hills. It was as if some wonderful thing was there, as it might be a healing well, or some other miracle, or a holy person such as there were of old time.

I said as much to Gideon, but he was looking away over shoulder to Plash and the long spire of blue smoke going up from the Stone House. He began to whistle below his breath, for he'd never whistle outright, even at the merriest, but always very quiet and to his mommets. So I said no more, and in a while our old road ended, and we came into the main road where it was bad going, for whatever the weather was, the road the Romans made was good going, and even better than the turnpike. In a little we passed the mill folk going soberly along, and then a tuthree more, and soon we were riding up the hill into the town, with the plovers crying about us in their winter voices.

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So we rode to Lullingford to look upon a dream. For the house we were about seeing was woven into the dream of Gideon's life. The house, that is, along with what it meant, the maids and the men, the balls and the dinners with the gentry at the 'Mug of Cider' at election time.

When we were going through the ford as you come into the lower part of the place, Gideon said —

'I wish Jancis was riding pillion with me.'

'Why, so she shall,' I said, 'the very next time we come. Why shouldna she come every time?'

'There be Beguildy.'

'Oh, Beguildy! I'll wile un with his own spells and charm un with his own charms,' I said, and I laughed as we went up the narrow street, so that heads came out of windows here and there to see what it might be.

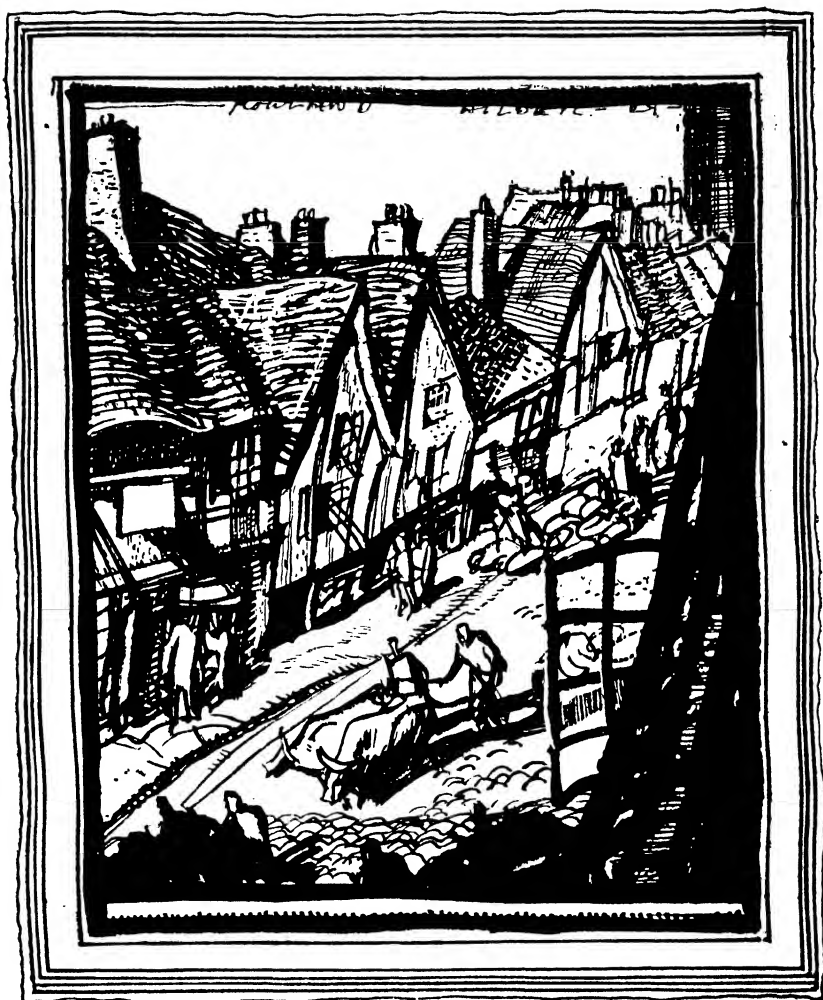
'Husht now, girl!' says Gideon. 'Laugh quiet. Not like a wild curlew.'

'But a curlew's very good company, and a pleasanter voice I seldom heard, and I'm pleased with the compliment, lad.'

And indeed I was pleased with the world and all. For there was summat about Lullingford, as if a different air blew there, and as if there was a brighter sun and a safer daylight. I knew not why it was. It was a quiet place, though not near so quiet as now. Folk go off to the cities these days, but when I was young they gathered together from many miles around into the little market towns. Still, it was quiet, and very peaceful, though not with the stillness of Sarn, that was almost deathly, times. There was one broad street of black and white houses, jutting out above, and gabled, and made into rounded shop windows below. They stood back in little gardens. At the top of the street was the church, long and low, with a tremendous high steeple, well carved and pleasant to see. Under the shadow of the church was the big, comfortable inn, with its red sign painted with a tall blue mug of cider. It had red curtains in the windows, and a glow of firelight in the winter, and it seemed to say, in being so nigh the church, that its landlord's conscience was clear and his ale honest, and that none would get more than was good for him there. But of the last I a little doubt.

Of a Sunday the shops had each a bit of white canvas stuff hung afore the window like an apron, which made it seem very pious and respectable. There were few shops, and only one of each kind, so you could never run from one to another, cheapening goods.

There was the Green Canister, where they kept groceries and spools and pots and pans, and there was the maltster's and the butcher's and the baker's, for Lullingford was well up with the times, since it wasna all



towns could boast a baker in days when nearly everybody baked at home. Then there was the leather shop, for boots and harness, and the tailor's, which was only open in winter, for in summer he travelled round the country doing piecework. There was the smithy, too, where the little boys crowded after Dame-School every winter dusk, begging to warm their hands and roast chestnuts and taters. It was a pleasant thing to see the sparks go up, roaring, and to feel the hearty glow about you, warming you to the heart's core, with nothing to pay or to do, like love. Near by the smithy was the row of little cottages where was the weaver's. Like the tailor, he went abroad over the country-side in summer, and sometimes to a village in winter, if it was open weather. But in hard weather he stayed in his snug slip of a house and heard the wind roaring over from the mountains north to the mountains south. I never could tell why this cottage drew me, even from a child. It had a narrow garden and a walk of red brick, an oaken paling, and bushes of lavender on either side the walk. Three well-whitened steps led up to the door, and there was a window of many little panes, not bottle-glass. Above was another window. At the back, a patch of garden ran down to the meadows, and there was a second window in the living-room that looked over this garden and the meadows, to the mountains. This I knew, because I went there once with a message in the old weaver's time. Upon the front of the house was a vine, very old and twisted. This was a rare thing in a place of such hard winters, but the town was sheltered by the mountains, and the weaver's house faced south, so the vine throve, and though in cold seasons the grapes didna always ripen, in some years they ripened very well. What with the vine and the lavender and the pleasant shadows on the strip of green lawn, and the lilac tree that stood beside the door, and what with the great weaving-frame in the living-room, which was comfortable with firelight shining on brasses and copper vessels, and very well kept, what with it all, I could never pass it without a look of longing. I was used to envy the fat thrushes hopping on the lawn. It drew me as heaven draws the poor sinner, weary of his miry wanderings.

So to-day, as we rode by, I said —

'Gideon, what is it makes that house different to the other housen?'

'It inna different.'

'Oh, but it's as different as if it was builded of stone fetched from another world!' I cried out. 'It's as different as if the timbers were falled in the forests of the Better Land.'

'Dear to goodness, girl, you bin raving,' says he. 'Husht, or the beadle'll put you in pound.'

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So I hushed, and we came to the 'Mug of Cider', and after turning our beasts in among the rest, we set out our goods in the market.

The market was in the open, in a paven square by the church. Each had his own booth, and the cheeses stood in mounds between. There were a sight of old women in decent shawl and cotton bonnets selling the same as we had, butter and eggs and poultry. There was a stall for gingerbread and one for mincepies. There was a sunbonnet stall and a toy stall, and one for gewgaws such as strings of coral and china cats, shoe buckles and amulets and beaded reticules. It was a merry scene, with the bright holly and mistletoe, the cheeses yellow in the sun, and the gingerbread as brown and sticky as chestnut buds.

The butcher stood at his door, which gave on to the market-place, shouting his meat, and holding up a long, shining knife, enough to make you think the French were coming. There was a woman selling hot potatoes and pig's fry, and a crockman who put up his wares to auction, and every time the clock chimed he broke summat, keeping some 'seconds' in readiness, which served to amuse the people. Then the mummers came along and gave us a treat, and in one corner the beast-leech was pulling teeth out for a penny each, and had a crowd watching. What with them all shouting, and the mummers mouthing their parts, and the crash of broken china, and beasts lowing and bleating from the fair ground close by, and the chimes ringing out very sweet at the half-hours, you may think there was a cheerful noise.

When we'd got rid of our goods, we went into the 'Mug of Cider' for a snack. Ten or a dozen old men sat without, though the air was so nipping that they must have bin starved. Each one was holding a great pewter tankard, and they were roaring out at the top of their voices —

'The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not fear.'

Each one went his own way and made his own tune, and I thought how angered Mister Beguildy would be if he could hear 'em making such an untuneful sound, for he was very particular over his row of flints, and when he struck them he was troubled if they didna strike the note true.

From BOOK IV, CHAPTER 2

There was a real tempest blowing, that had been rising for two or three days, and it blew up the loose straws and the chaff in the rickyard till the air was full of them, dusty and choking. Out in the field I had to go close

up to Gideon and shout afore I could make him hear. There was a roar in the tree-tops like the sound of weirs after the snow melts, and a howling in the chimneys that made you glad of four walls and a roof. I said to Gideon when we were at our tea, did he think it would blow the tops off the stacks? But he said no, they were well weighted. It was only two days now till the dealer came to price the grain, and only three days after that till the wedding. Knowing this, and being easy in mind about Beguildy, since he'd taken no harm from the blow, I listened to the wind very contented, and made some rounds of toast, and thought about Kester. For I do not think there's nothing makes you feel so contented as a roaring wind in the chimney when all's well. I said should we go to bed early, and Gideon said we might as well, seeing we'd worked hard and the harvest was in. So we went at eight, and I fell asleep in a minute with the sound of the loud, dry tempest in my ears.

When I woke, sudden, I thought, 'It be the Judgment!' There was a great light and a roaring, very dreadful to hear, and knockings and cries out of the night. I lay there, mazed, saying '*Our Father*' as fast as I could, and wishing I'd been more regular at church. Then I heard Gideon's voice calling from window, and other voices below, and one was the voice of Sexton's Sammy. This comforted me in my foolish fear, for I felt as if Sammy would be able to think of a text, and mouth it, too, even on Judgment night. For night it still was, and early, too, since we found out after that we'd not been abed much more than two hours. Gideon came rushing past my door, shouting for me, so I got up and put on my clo'es, for I supposed that whether it was the Judgment or not I'd better wear them, though in the pictures the redeemed go in their night rails. But I did feel that I must wait to get to heaven afore I could be at my ease to stand afore Sexton's Sammy in my night-gown.

I ran downstairs and out, and then I saw. I thought even the end of the world would have been better than that, for then we'd have been provided for, with no more harvests to get in nor money to gather with pain and labour. It would be the same for all in that hour, but this was for us only, and crushed us as a waggon-wheel crushes an ear of wheat.

For it was the corn burning that made the roaring noise. It was the harvest, all of it, the whole garnering of all those years of work, the very stuff of Gideon's soul, and our future. It was no great comet nor flaming star raging across the sky to herald in the end of all, no trumpet of an archangel pealing and whining along the black night betwixt the trembling worlds. It was only the corn. Only all we had! Only that which was to

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make a kindly man, a loving man, of our Gideon, since having it he would leave slaving by day and dark, and making us all slave, and would work only like any other man. Only the corn, that meant a bit of comfort for Mother, a bit of hope for me. Only the corn, that would give Jancis dear children, and the place of wife by fire-side, and a bit of love, may be. Oh, my soul, it was the corn! I clung to the rickyard gate, and my hair was lifted in the fierce-hot wind. There were black figures running in the red light, most like a picture of hell, but they were nought, and less than nought. The vasty roaring wind went on, taking the fire with it. I could see that the thing must have started with the barley, that was on the west of the rickyard, whence the wind was coming. There was no barley row. Where it had been were two great round housen made of white fire, very fearful to see, being of the size and shape of the stacks, but made of molten flame. There was no substance in them, and it was marvel how they stood so. Now and again a piece of this molten stuff would fall inward with no sound, and there could be seen within caves of grey ash and red, sullen, smouldering fire. So it will surely be when the world is burned with fervent heat in the end of all. It will go rolling on, maybe, as it ever has, only it will be no more a kindly thing with mists about it, a pleasant painted ball with patterns of blue seas and green mountains upon its roundness. It will be a thing rotten with fire as an apple is rotten when the wasps have been within, light and empty and of no account. So was our barley, falling inwards with no sound, as though one went here and there within, unseen. It was a worse thing to see than if it had fallen down in a heap, for being yet a stack, it seemed like a jest of some demon, saying —

‘Well, what is to do? There be your stacks of barley! Make barley bread and eat.’ I looked at those two abodes of demons, of the roundness and height of our good barley stacks, and I remembered the barley, oh, the sweet barley, rustling in the wind of dawn! I called to mind the ploughing for it, in such good behopes, and the sowing of it, between the sowing of the winter wheat and the sowing of the summer wheat, Gideon and me walking up and down the fields with the bags of seed slung over shoulder, or with a deep round lid to hold enough of seed for one crossing of the field there and back, and swinging out our arms with a great giving movement, as if we were feeding all the world, a thing I dearly loved to see. For reaping, though it is good to watch as be all the year’s doings on a farm, is a grutching and grabbing thing compared with sowing. You must lean out to it and sweep it in to you, and hold it to your bosom, jealous, and grasp it and take it. There is ever a greediness in reaping with the sickle, in my sight. There is not in scything, which is a large destroying

movement without either love or anger in it, like the judgments of God. Nor is there in flailing, which is a thing full of anger, but without any will or wish to have or keep. But reaping is all greed, just as sowing is all giving. For there you go, up and down the wide fields, bearing that which you have saved with so much care, winnowing it from the chaff, and treasuring it for this hour. And though it is all you have, you care not, but take it in great handfuls and cast it abroad, with no thought of holding back any. On you go, straight forrard, and the bigger your hand the better pleased you are, and you cast it away on this side and on that, till one not learned in country ways would say, here is a mad person. For it would seem as if you were feeding all the birds of the country, since there was always a following of rooks in the furrows, and starlings, and many small birds, which would be very unprofitable chickens.

It is a pretty thing to see the golden seed tossed in the air with sunshine on it and the light spring wind scattering it here and there; or if it is winter wheat, then it will be, very like, a still brown day with the mellowness of old beer in the colours, and the scent of the air. I was always ready for the sowing, though Gideon did not care about it, and indeed would often seem to begrutch casting the grain from him, and would sow too thin and so waste land and labour. I thought of all this, and of the fair evenings when we had walked forth, Mother and me, to look at the young barley pushing up, bright and sparse, then thickening, till the brown earth was all greened over, and springing taller and brighter, stiff and pointed, and then softening and lengthening yet more, with the wind running in it like a boat furrowing the water, and finding a voice at last, and a song, and sending up its green, plaited ears to swell and ripen, till at the end they stood perfect as if the Lord had but that moment lifted His hand from them, all made of purest, clearest gold. Gold leaves, gold stalks, gold knops for heads, and these knops bearded thick with gold as well. Yet it was an innocent gold, and not that gold which is called the bane. Oh, how I could mind it, on those still Sunday mornings when I went to the well, and would set down the buckets for a little while and go out into the corn fields that lay beneath the vasty pale blue peace of the sky like creatures satisfied and at rest! There would be small birds about, making low, contented cries and soft songs. There would be a ruffling breeze, and rooks far up the sky, and a second bloom of pale gold flowers on the honeysuckle wrathes against the blue. There would be warmship that lapped you round, and the queenly gift of the scent of corn. What other scent is like it? There is so much in it, beyond other sweets. There is summer in it, and frost. There is water in it, and the heart of the flint which the

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corn has taken up into its hollow stalks. There is bread in it, and life for man and beast.

All these thoughts, moithered and bewildered, came to me as I clung to the gate with the parching wind upon my face, too stunned to move. There are misfortunes that make you spring up and rush to save your elf, but there are others that are too bad for this, for they leave nought to do. Then a stillness falls on the soul, like the stillness of a rabbit when the s oat looks hotly upon it and it knows that there is no more to be done.

The fire was in the two biggest stacks of wheat now. It had gone upon them and they were not. Soon they would be as the barley was. They were good stacks, those, of a solid, squarish oblong, and as high as might be with safety, for we had such a harvest that we could only make room by having the stacks high. It was good wheat, too, long in the straw, and no touch of mildew. It had taken the most time of all both to sow and to reap, and in the lugging it had the biggest waggons all day. And now it was gone! It was a great mound of fire with the black shapes of two stacks in it, and soon the fire would be passed on and there would be no more sound, but just two grey-white housen for demons, with baleful red gleams in the crumbling passages within. There were more stacks of wheat by the hedge, but the next to the blazing stacks was the oats. The lovely oats, so pale and fine, like ferns for a lady's table!

They were so sweet, the oats, so very fine and fair, like midsummer grasses come golden. I did ever love the oats best of all. And suddenly I was all mother to the oats. The fire met have the wheat and the barley, but it should not take my oats. I clomb over the gate and ran where the little figures moved. I caught Gideon by the sleeve.

'You mun save the oats!' I screamed. 'Oh, save the oats, as is so fair and fine!'

But he said nought. He was working like a madman, and I saw that it was the oats he was trying to save, the oats and the stacks by the hedge. He and Sammy were digging trenches between the blazing stacks and these, to fill with water.

'Where's Tivvy?' I said, for now I was come to myself I wanted all the help there was.

'Gone for Feyther,' said Sammy, sweating and groaning over his spade, for the fire was gaining on them.

'Shall I take Bendigo and go for help?' I said. 'Or shall I get the buckets and begin fetching water?'

'Ah, that!' says Sammy. 'Do that, for help ud be too late, a power.'

Not a word did Gideon say. He was stricken with a dumb madness,

PRECIOUS BANE

but he worked like ten men. What with the horror of mind and the stress of labour and the great heat of the fire, the sweat ran down his face in a river and his clo'es were as if he had been in the water. And being so wet, and so near the fire, he went in a cloud of steam, which had a very strange look, as if he had been put under some curse or was already in hell.

I loosed Bendigo and the oxen and cows, such as were lying in, and they went pounding away into the woods, half crazy with fear. I woke Mother and told her she must dress and come to the mere and dip while we made a chain for the buckets, to send them from hand to hand. I got together all the pails and buckets, and thought it seemed a pitiful thing that with all that great mere full of water we could only slake our fire with as much as we could get into our little buckets. And I've thought since that when folk grumble about this and that and be not happy, it is not the fault of creation, that is like a vast mere full of good, but it is the fault of their bucket's smallness.

Mother came with me like a child, very mazed and quiet.

'Must I dip now, Prue?' she said.

'You can begin now, and have all the buckets ready,' I answered. 'But the time when you must dip your best will be in a tuthree minutes when we come.'

'Now, Sarn,' says Sammy, 'you mun leave digging and come for water.'

For though it may seem a thing not to be believed, all that awful night, though it was Gideon that did the most of the work, it was Sammy or me that gave the orders. Gideon would go at what he was set at in a frenzy, and go on after it stopped being any use, working like an ox at the threshing floor. He threw down the spade when Sammy spoke, and came with us to the mere. Mother was toiling over the dipping. She looked smaller and smaller as the trouble thickened about her, like a person that had eaten some fairy stuff to make her not able to be seen. She seemed no more than one of those little brown birds that will light down by the water for a while in their journeying and then be gone, nobody knows where.

'Now here comes Feyther, thanks be to the Lord,' said Sammy. He was a good lad that night, was Sammy, and while the fire lasted he never said but one text, and that a very temptuous one, 'Burning and fuel of fire', though he must have thought of no end of them.

Sure enough there was Sexton bursting through the wood, and Tivvy not far behind, and an angry voice crying on the wind a long way back, that was Missis Sexton, who misliked being by her lonesome.

'Now,' says Sammy, 'Feyther can go in the rickyard and chuck on the water to dout the fire, Tivvy can gather the empty buckets as fast as he



throws 'em down, and run back to Missis Sarn with 'em, and you and me and Prue'll run with full ones. I did think we might make a chain and pass from hand to hand, but we be too few, Sarn.'

Gideon spoke for the first time.

'I never,' he said with a wild, pale face, 'never had much strength about me, only me and these two.'

And with that he put his arm across his face as he was used to do when he was a lad and things went badly wrong, and cried.

Ah, I tell you it was a thing few would have cared to see, a great, strong, masterful man like that, crying like a little lad.

'Now, now, Sarn!' says Sexton, shocked as we all were. 'Now, you munna take on. The Lord gave and Lord hath taken away.'

At that Gideon came to himself.

'The Lord?' he says. 'No. It wunna the Lord! It was Beguildy. When we've douted the stacks I shall fetch un and roast un.'

No words of mine can tell you the awful way Gideon said that. I wanted to ask how he knew, if he did know, but there was no time for words. We were running to and again with two full buckets each, which, after an hour or so, is enough to try a strong man, leave alone a woman. Water carrying is an easy job if there's no hurry and you can use a yoke. But to run stumbling through a roasting heat, which we did for most of the journey, and to know that if you tarried the oats would go, and maybe if you didna tarry, was enough to take the spirit out of anybody. The oats did go. The fire leapt the ditch and all, and there was a new, tremendous blaze. I lost heart after that, and though I ran, it was with no hope.

'Oh, I be so tired,' said poor Mother. But I couldna let her rest.

'If we canna save it,' I said, 'you'll never get free of tending swine, Mother.'

So she bent her poor old back again, standing half in the water, in spite of the rheumatics. The cry went up to save the barn, for if the barn was lost, the house was lost. At that, Mother left dipping for water, so I was forced to get Tivvy to do it, and we had to bring back our own empty pails. I looked up once, and there was Mother fetching things out of the house. I looked at them after, and there was her sewing and the copper fruit pan, and a sampler she did when she was little, and Father's picture cut out in black paper, done by parson's brother-law, who was part foreign. People thought he must be simple to play with scissors and paper like a child, though they owned that he did it very well, and said that being part foreign he knew no better. Though Mother had been so mortal feared of Father in life, she treasured this picture in the quecrest way. So

PRECIOUS BANE

there it was with the other things and six pots of damson cheese, and Pussy in a basket.

It was only at dawn, when the wind dropped and a fine, quiet rain began to fall, that we got the fire under. At least, it had burnt itself out, and we managed to save barn and house. The red light was gone from the sky and the burning from the mere. For all night it had seemed that the water in the mere was turned to fiery spirit and was burning, too. Everything was there, confused and topsy-turvy, the red and yellow flames, the smoke bellying in the wind, the white-hot stacks, hollow and canting, the farm and the barn and our little black figures like mommets in the tumult

FAREWELL TO BEAUTY

'Their being is to be perceived.'

BERKELEY

Let fall your golden showers, laburnum tree!
Break the grey casket of your buds for me —
Soon I shall go where never gold is seen,
And who will be with you as I have been?

Quick with your silver notes, O silver bird!
Wistful, I listen for the song I heard
Many a day, but soon shall hear no more,
For summoning winds are out along the shore.

All things so early fade — swiftly pass over,
As autumn bees desert the withering clover.
Now, with the bee, I sing immortal June;
• How soon both song and bee are gone — how soon!

Who'll watch the clover secretly uncloset?
Finger the sycamore buds, afire with rose?
Trace the mauve veins of the anemone?
Know the peculiar scent of every tree?

Maybe the solemn hill, the enchanted plain
Will be but arable and wild again,
Losing the purple bloom they wore for me —
The dreaming god I could so clearly see.

POPULUS TREMULA

THE aspen stood with her feet in the deep-hidden well which she kept cool all summer. Close beside her, sheltering her from the coldest winds, was a wall of dark rock, where grew minute ferns and mountain speedwell and the bright wild strawberry and fragrant ground-ivy and rose-root. Above hung the thymy hill where dry grasses and bracken murmured or screamed in the wind, unsheltered far up there against the cold sky of early spring. In front, opposite the rock, was an old, tall, ragged hedge of elder and spindle, wild apple, honeysuckle, cornel and briar roses. Beyond was a pasture where the sheep lay, a farm, slugged beneath the frost, a welter of wood and meadow stretching mile upon mile to the grave, dark, omnipresent hills. On the west an oakwood shelved. On the east was a butte of the hill.

So the aspen, regnant over her little enclosure of quiet turf and leaf-mould, enjoyed a deep peace far below the bruit of the storm, a peace like that of the creatures in the secret well. The green sunrise, the voices of the plovers wailing for summer, cries from the farm, the sea-sound in the wood, the infinite faint murmur of the plain, were all known to the aspen. For the rich earth which had made the wheat, the doves and the song of the doves, the ethereal wild rose, the kestrel gazing sunward with unconquerable pride, had also made the aspen. She was their kin, and when she trembled, it was the plain that trembled. When she was torn, the plain bled. When her roots drank daintily of the well, she shared a sacrament of which earth and sky had compounded the wafer and the wine.

All winter the aspen had bent to the storm, black with rain, white with snow, dumbly enduring dark skies. But now the first lamb stood uncertainly on long legs in the home meadow, and mercury sprang startlingly green in the woods, and through the aspen's upper boughs, where the knobs of the buds swelled, ran a deep flush of gold. Oval, pale, between the hollows of mossed roots, in the soft, thick, wrinkled leaves, opened the first primrose on its rose-pink stalk. The hedge of cornel and briar rose and elder and spindle quickened in tongues of pale fire. The aspen's little kingdom was strown with nosegays of starry celandine and dog violets and scattered, lengthening, pink-stalked primroses.

The sap ran strongly under the urgent compulsion of life. The flower-buds swelled. Suddenly the aspen burst into blossom, so that every yellow twig was hung with swaying rosy tassels, and the resinous sweetness of the

POPULUS TREMULA

broken buds made a deep atmosphere about the tree. Doves, brown as the buds, eyed the aspen with eyes as rosy as the flower tassels, and, alighting there, began to coo softly. Wood-pigeons from the western oak wood tossed down their brave notes like golden balls. Softly against the damp brown rock arose hyacinths, and pink-stained anemones where the celandine had bloomed. But still, though ten thousand tassels swung like bridal garlands, the aspen had no song.

The young bracken stole upward. Pigeons were nesting. Plovers had forgotten their winter cry. The cuckoo had come. Through the white, soft wood of the tree life shuddered up, urgent as death itself, creative, insistent. Suddenly, amazingly, the aspen was in leaf. Small, soft and round, the folded leaves stood up from the twigs. Then, with demur that changed to assent, they drooped. And as they drooped they began to tremble, as if a heat-haze lingered over the tree. The aspen sighed. It was a sigh, faint as morning mist, but it was expression.

She waited. What would come? Every bird in the wood had found its solace. Every flower beneath the hill had known the sun. Fragrance and music went together across the plain like lovers unveiled. Earth and sky were cymbals, striking out life.

No one had rebuked the aspen. Still she waited, trembled, sighed. The woman dipping from the well sighed also as she heard the voice of her lover calling the herd from cropping cool grass beneath the hedge. She trembled beneath the shaken tree and spilt the bright blue water among the large spent anemones. The aspen recollected herself, ingathered. In all that musical sweet morning none had chidden her, nor at noon, nor when the shadows lengthened. When the crystal ball of the moon stood upon the hill and a clear light without colour tranced the plain, the cowman stole through the silence to keep his tryst. His cattle, wild with summer's glory, broke pasture and gambolled, soundless, on the moss with soundless shadows. And the aspen, aware of all, wrapt in all, knew that none would rebuke her, and lifting up her voice, silver with the green and white beauty of ten thousand leaves, tender and plashing and cool as crisp water over a fall, in the absolute, holy stillness, in the hush of heaven, she sang.

THE ANCIENT GODS

Certainly there were splashings in the water,
Certainly there were shadows on the hill,
Dark with the leaves of purple-spotted orchis;
But now all's still.

It may be that the catkin-covered willow,
With her illusive, glimmering surprise,
Pale golden-tinted as a tall young goddess,
Deceived my eyes;

And the white birches wading in the margin,
Each one a naked and a radiant god,
Dazzled me; and the foam was flung by currents
Where no feet trod.

Only I know I saw them — stately, comely,
Within the leafy shadows of the stream;
They woke amid the shallow, singing water
A fading gleam.

They left no trail for any beast to follow,
No track upon the moss for man to trace;
In a long, silent file up-stream they vanished
With measured pace.

The hollow water curved about their ankles
Like amber; splashes glistened on their thighs;
Sun barred their lifted heads and their far-seeing
Yet sightless eyes.

Some were like women, with deep hair of willows,
Bare breasts and gracious arms and long, smooth hips,
And the red roses of desire half frozen
Upon their lips:

THE ANCIENT GODS

But most were massive-browed and massive-shouldered
And taller than the common height of men.
They went as those that have not home nor kindred,
Nor come again.

Still, where the birches fingered their reflection,
The thrushes chanted to the evening sky;
Still the grey wag-tails raced across the shingle
As they went by.

Beyond the furthest of the saffron shallows
I lost them in the larches' rainy green,
And only saw the stretches of marsh-mallows
Where they had been.

You say the willow and the birch deceived me:
But I know well that I beheld to-day
The ancient gods, unheralded, majestic,
Upon their way.

FROM
ARMOUR WHEREIN HE TRUSTED

LOOKING backward, I find nought in those stirring days like the guerdon of my present peace. I go out into the clear blue air, when God His sun shines hot and golden; and, resting upon the cliff, level with the top of a fruited sycamore, I look down through the lipping green to the lipping blue and watch the long quiet waves come in through the crevices of the leavy boughs. And after a while, turning and looking upward at the rocky steep behind me, I see, on the cliff top, the yellow-gold of toadflax blazing against the porcelain heavens. And what with so much light and so much warmth, the world bedecked with banners, doves crooning, seas murmuring, stars in silver armour waiting beyond the blue to sentinel the night and God indwelling, it is as if, escaping the *rigor mortis*, I had come to heaven by the little path made for children, and so was already in beatitude. For now the pain that was so sharp is done, and the hands that clung to me, the voices that called to me, He hath gathered to Himself, and they that lured me frommet now persuade me toerts His glory, whither I pray it may please Him to bring all men.

But on the evening of which I am telling there was nothing of peace but only heartbreak and befuddlement of the soul. I looked about my familiar home where the early sun was used to slant in through the arrow-slits, barring the floor with gold, and all day the sweet-scented rushes, that my mother would have new-gathered every morning, made the hall fresh and pleasant, and in the evening the westering sun stole in once more, from the opposite arrow-slits, and later the moon came with silver bars for gold. And all so ordered and so peaceful, the great coffers of meal around the walls, the drinking-horns and wooden cups and trenchers all decently set upon a shelf of oak, my mother's tapestry-work by the largest loophole with her spinning-wheel, our hunting-horns and armour on the wall, and the flickering lights from the ever-burning fire of logs shining on silver helmets and drawing a hundred gleams from the bright chain-mail. From the beams hung smoked salmon and other fish and dried haunches of venison and fitches of wild boar. There, too, hung my mother's herbs — thyme, sweet basil, marjoram and rue, rosemary, fennel and wild spike-nard. There also were Gudrun's simples. In a deep nook beyond the hearth stood wooden vats of honey, well covered, and casks of mead and a few flagons of rare red wine given to my father long ago by the Conqueror when he came here, surveying for Doomsday Book, a little while

ARMOUR WHEREIN HE TRUSTED

after my mother and father were wed. There was the settle and beside it my father's tall carven chair. Just where the eastern sunrays touched it, hung upon the wall a cross of oak, with Christ upon it, but not, as it were, in pain, only drooping, as a lily at midsummer, seeming to sleep. Outside upon the roof the pigeons crooned and the bell rang drowsily for matins and prime and evensong. It seemed a place whose peace only the last trumpet, pealing from the tower of heaven, could break. Even the dogs were quiet in their minds, resting chin on paws with one eye shut, not brawling among themselves. Our serving men and maids were sober and honest, the wenches not loving overmuch, good with their spindles, knowing how to cleanse and full the wearing apparel in the shallow stony brook that goes across the way from below our hill up to the hill of Cotardicote. Nor would they drink the milk from the wooden buckets when they went milking in the meadow, nor listen to pixies, nor put their fingers in the honey-vats. But they would cluster together by the door when my father prayed of an evening, as frightened sheep will gather, and when he said the *Ora pro nobis* they would answer all together —

‘And also for us, poor souls.’

* * *

On a summer afternoon, about milking time, you could not find a pleasanter place than this our hall, with the door opened wide on the rolling woods, the sunlight streaming in, the air, full of the fragrancy of aromatic leaves, blossoms and the flower of the grass, coming in heady and full of life. There was the cauldron simmering above the logs, and there were the cattle lowing in the beeves' field, and in the forest, near and far, the sweet roaring of the doves. If any folk came, they felt the peace of it and slipped into the life of the place and troubled it not at all. But this being, who lay now before the hearth, was other. The safety of the place seemed to shrink and wither before him. It seemed that the comfort we set store by and the sorrows we feared were all alike to him. For a man who has battled through a torrent heeds not the rain beating in at the loopholes, and a man who has been a long while tortured does not complain of a toothache. He seemed to be under governance of his own law and none other's, and he seemed of very sad cheer and also without pity. As he lay there, brown as wood, it seemed to me as if the wooden Christ had come down from the wall and was now tended by Gudrun, whispering to us with pale lips, staring upon us with cavernous eyes.

It was late, near to midnight, when at last he came quite to himself and

ARMOUR WHEREIN HE TRUSTED

stood afore the hearth, gaunt and of great stature, seeming to carry upon his back a shadowy Cross. And ever as I gazed on him, meseemed he was made not of flesh and blood but of hollow wood. His caverns of eyne were hollow, and his voice as he now uplifted it was hollow also, and rolled around the silent place like lost winds blowing from the crypts of empty night where yet God has created nothing. There was, as it were, no year in him. His word was a nay-word. His rule was denial. He dwelt in shadow.

He lifted up his lean, long arm, and the cresset flaring behind him set its gnarled shadow on the other wall.

He set his devouring eyes upon me

'Young man,' he said, 'I say unto thee, arise and come. The Lord hath need of thee.'

At these words there came a shriek from where my mother was, so sharp it seemed it must have cut her heart in two.

We stared upon the man.

'Gilbert Polrebec,' he said, in his strange tongue, mingled of Saxon and some country French, 'I come from Peter Hermit. Thou must return with me now, swiftly, for because of his old kindness for thy mother he wills that thou go with him in this first glorious Crusade, walking beside him as his own familiar friend. Multitudes that none can number will be about thee, marching Godward, and if thou diest there will be a seat for thee in the innermost circle of the heavens at God His elbow.'

'Cruel and evil one!' shrieked Nesta, and rushing at the man she smote him on the face with a litten torch.

I put my arms about her to restrain her. But it seemed the man cared no more for blazing torches than for wolves. He went on speaking, calm as a Mass-thane in his own chapel, though the hot pine-resin had seared his cheek all across.

My father meanwhile sat down heavily in his chair, as if his knees would not uphold him.

'If thou wilt not leave father and mother and wife, housen and lands, thou art not worthy of me, saith the Lord.'

My father spoke, and his voice was hoarse and shaken as an old man's voice.

'The lad is but young, sir.'

'We desire the young,' the man replied.

'And lately wed.'

'In heaven is no marrying nor giving in marriage.'

'And we be ageing folk, his mother and my own self, and we have ill-wishers and we need our son.'

'The Lord hath ill-wishers also, in all the towns of Galilee, and He com-mandeth Gilbert Polrebec to fight in His behalf.'

Now, seeing him stand afore the image of our Lord, it seemed that my thoughts grew moithered, so I could not tell which was the stranger and which was Christus, or whether Christus had been in peril of wolves and recovered by Gudrun, or whether the one that summoned, speaking with so stern voice, summoned in truth from the comfortless tree that hung upon the wall.

'Would to God,' cried my father, 'that we had a Mass-thane here, or somebody to advise us. The ways of God be past finding out, and indeed it seemeth at times as if He was our chief ill-wisher.'

His mouth was trembling like a fretful babe's.

'Speak not blasphemy,' said the intruder.

'There be plenty of lusty lads at Stretton-in-the-Dale,' said Gudrun. 'Lads with too much of Satan in them, that Jerusalem might cure. Many's the house with half a score of them. Go there, good sir, and call some of these and leave this lad, that is the prop and stay of the house.'

'Did that Blessed One, on the bitter Cross, have prop and stay? Is a man better than his Master?'

Then he uplifted his loud, cold voice, ah! cold as the winter wind on the heights of Stiperstones, and it rolled and echoed about the room above the roaring of the fire and the howling of the wolves and my mother's urgent beating on the door that had begun again.

'Young man! I say unto thee, arise! A crown of glory and a trophy of stars, dominion in Paradise and the thanks of God His Mother — or, if thou refuse, anathema maranatha!'

Then he set his eyes upon me, sucking out my soul, and as I looked into his eyes it seemed to me that he had looked on all the world and found it waste and wilderness.

So, turning anywhere to save me from his eyes, that caught me and lured me into a spell of terror, I looked toward the Christus on the wall. And behold, a dreadful marvel! For even as I looked, the image shud-dered and two tears rolled down the face, and He did bat His eyes at me. And when I saw the Lord God so shuddering and weeping upon our wall, and when, in the manner of some poor babe denied of some sweetmeat or some revel, He did so bat His eyes and droop His head, I knew that I must go, and my heart turned in my side and my soul uttered a cry, and I forgot myself, falling on darkness.

And so in the grey dawn we departed, leaving the castle all blinded and

ARMOUR WHEREIN HE TRUSTED

folded in mist, and the litel grey garden blotted out, and those three beloved ones weeping and groaning at the door where I was to go in and out no more until many a year was fled. But in the wan light of morning I saw that the Christus on the rood wept no more, nor batted His eyes, b it seemed more at ease, satisfied as a child at some promise long withheld b it at last given.

VIROCONIUM

Virocon — Virocon —
Still the ancient name rings on
And brings, in the untrampled wheat,
The tumult of a thousand feet.

Where trumpets rang and men marched by,
None passes but the dragon-fly.
Athwart the grassy town, forlorn,
The lone dor-beetle blows his horn.

The poppy standards droop and fall
Above one rent and mournful wall:
In every sunset-flame it burns,
Yet towers unscathed when day returns.

And still the breaking seas of grain
Flow havenless across the plain:
The years wash on, their spindrift leaps
Where the old city, dreaming, sleeps.

Grief lingers here, like mists that lie
Across the dawns of ripe July;
On capital and corridor
The pathos of the conqueror.

The pillars stand, with alien grace,
In churches of a younger race;
The chiselled column, black and rough,
Becomes a roadside cattle-trough:

The skulls of men who, right or wrong,
Still wore the splendour of the strong,
Are shepherds' lanterns now, and shield
Their candles in the lambing field.

VIROCONIUM

But when, through evening's open door,
Two lovers tread the broken floor,
And the wild-apple petals fall
Round passion's scarlet festival;

When cuckoos call from the green gloom
Where dark, shelving forests loom;
When foxes bark beside the gate,
And the grey badger seeks his mate —

There haunts within them secretly
One that lives while empires die,
A shrineless god whose songs abide
Forever in the country's de.



THE JOY OF FRAGRANCE

'Chests of fragrant medicinal balm
To work cool ointments for the grievèd flesh.'

CHARLES WELLS

As the colour-blind slowly learn to distinguish shades of blue and green so the scent-clogged may explore the almost unknown delight of fragrance, until they can disentangle the ravelled sweetness in the air. We know by the colour of her burden under what friendly roof the bee seeks alms this morning — whether she begged in the brown hut of the figwort or the rosy pavilion of the willow herb. So when the wind comes along secret ways with the laugh of a naughty child who has found a treasure and will not tell of it, we know where he has been by the scents that cling to him like burrs to a truant lad. Here are the sharpness of bilberry leaves, the emanation of moss, the reek of a blue-spined bonfire, the resin of sticky poplar buds, the metheglin of white violets, and somewhere among them lingers the keenness of spray from the home of sea-mews.

Sometimes, when the east wind is full of meditative savagery, one almost fancies that a hot odour may have travelled in its caravan from the heart of China, bringing us a message from the spice trees of Kwangtung.

As in some uncanny flowers and distorted trees there seems to be an evil influence, so in many cloying scents there is sorcery. Down where the pale turf is dank, among the harsh smells of yew-trees, laurels, and Herb Paris, one almost sees the malevolent fair face of Vivian, as she passes — delicate and dishevelled — among the tangled shadows, weaving incantations with her wimple. Crush the purple orchis or berries of black bryony, and their necromancy brings dim thoughts of evil schemings, dishonoured deaths, unholy rites. Then gather a spray of wild artemisia; its sweet influence will exorcise the sense of brooding harm; it brings remembrance of well-being and well-doing, of love triumphant and dreams come true. When the honeyed wine of apple blossom is in the air and the freshness of dew is like a caress, we hear the youth of the world laughing — we see Perdita with her arms full of daffodils, and Atalanta coming through the meadows with wet, white feet.

These immemorial essences fill the mind with purple haze and auroral mist, conjuring impalpable visions of ancient things.

The origin of flower scents is full of mystery. Sometimes they seem to run through the minute veins like an ichor, as in wallflowers with their

THE JOY OF FRAGRANCE

scented petals; sometimes they are locked in the pollen casket, or brim the nectar-cup; sometimes they come from the leaf-pores, as in balm, and sometimes from the roots in addition, as in primroses and lilies. The essence lies in the arms of that small creature, the seed, who seldom tells her secret.

Flowers like the oxlip, with transparently thin petals, only faintly washed with colour, yet have a distinct and pervasive scent. Daisies are redolent of babyhood and whiteness. Wood anemones, lady's smock, bird's-foot trefoil and other frail flowers will permeate a room with their fresh breath. In some deep lane one is suddenly pierced to the heart by the sweetness of woodruff, inhabitant of hidden places, shining like a little lamp on a table of green leaves. It is like heliotrope and new-mown hay with something wholly individual as well. To stand still, letting cheek and heart be gently buffeted by the purity, is to be shriven.

The violet has long had such poor, negative virtues as modesty and self-effacement ascribed to her, because she stays in her hidden nook, apparently a very humble and unknown little creature. But from her quiet haunt she sends forth her fragrance like a voice into the world — the expression of a soul so rich that it cannot be contained within her narrow dwelling. She impresses it upon the gale; the wind becomes her henchman and carries it upon his shoulders. Then such as love violets travel up the strengthening sweetness and find this sleeping beauty in her fastness, tearing their hands and healing their hearts. So she finds her worshippers, her lovers.

Many common flowers have the graciousness of personality that some rare women have. Agrimony is one of these. Walking along a dusty highway in July, one becomes aware that every breath is a blessing from some wayside flower; and tracing the resinous sweetness as it freshens through the dust, finds the hitherto unnoticed spike of little yellow stars. Those who go by a wood in May are enfolded in a wave of delight, and whispering 'Wild hyacinths!' feel as if a child had kissed them.

Fragrance is the voice of inanimate things. The air is full of the cries of leaves and grass, softer than those of the flowers. In the dark night of the cedar there is a different atmosphere from that within the dusk of beeches or the green gloom of April larch woods. Sometimes, in places where there are no flowers, aromas dart upon one like little elves with sharp teeth, from corn and fir-cones, damp soil and toadstools, keen grass and pungent bracken. Even rock sends out a curious redolence in hot weather which unites with dried ling and herbs to form an undercurrent to the mellowness of gorse.

THE JOY OF FRAGRANCE

Down by a stream at dusk the water takes up into its freshness the breath of mallow, pennyroyal and willow-herb as they sway in their sleep. In a shower, unsuspected sweets rush out of ambush with a laugh, overpowering and imprisoning us. In the dewy summer dark, clover and night-flowering stock conspire with the campion and the sleepless honey-suckle to invade the drenched garden and to conquer and possess the dreaming house.

Often in winter across leagues of snow a mysterious fragrance comes inexplicable until we remember that snow itself has a faint emanation and that the essence of pines, of last year's hay and far-off violets can wander across the pure air for long distances, treasured (like wine in a crystal glass) by the frost.

Is anyone sickened by the sordidness of life? Let him go to the tents or flowering trees, when the cavalcade of the wild bee comes to the apple and the Arabs to Mecca, when the spinneys are fresh with quicken, and the fly hovers like a lover outside the shut door of the pear blossom and waits till the red cross of denial that marks the bud is changed to the yellow pollen-wreath of fulfilment.

The fragrance of limes, when every honey-dripping tassel has its clinging bee, is like the hail of a friend. The poignancy of it and the deep note of the bees weave themselves into a circumambient peace, within which each tree dwells like Saturn in his rings. It is fainter in the outer precincts, deepening to such a breathless delight as one penetrates to the centre that it is difficult to remember which sense is in touch with the voice of the bees and which with the voice of the tree.

A little wood I know has in May among its oaks and beeches many white pillars of gean trees, each with its own air round it. At long intervals a large, soft flower wanders down, vaguely honeyed, mixing its breath with the savour of sphagnum moss, and resting among the wood-sorrel. The wood-pigeons speak of love together in their deep voices, unashamed, too sensuous to be anything but pure. Among the enchanted pillars, on the carpet of pale sorrel, with a single flower cool in the hand, one is in the very throne-room of white light. A little further on the air is musky from the crowded minarets of the horse chestnut — white marble splashed with rose — where the bumble bee drones.

Insects are the artists of fragrance; they have a genius for it; there seems to be some affinity between the tenuity of their being and this most refined of the sense-impressions. Ghostly calls summon them to their banquets. The crane's-bill has a word for the gnat; the helleborine fills her goblet only for the wasp; the yellow iris calls to the honey-fly; the

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meadow saffron's veined cup is for the bee. Moths call each other by scent; so do bees; and probably the smallest ephemera follow the same law. These calls and answers cross the world continually, like a web of fine threads, most of them too slight for our comprehension.

Nature spreads her sweets for the poor: she gives them rosemary instead of sandal-buds, wild cassia instead of cinnamon, iris roots and ploughman's spikenard for those who cannot buy attar of roses. The nectar of full hives, warm wax, dry leaves, ripening apples — these are her commonplaces. The very beetle climbing a rough willow is redolent of flowers. On the darkest day of the year, with sleet in the air, you can find in the sombre shelter of a yew tree a pale blossom scented like heliotrope. It is only the wild butterbur, yet its delicacy lifts the wintry day on to the steps of summer. Among the most desolate sandhills you may find in July acres of wax-white pyrola — like lilies of the valley splashed with pink — covering the plains between the lonely ridges of harsh, grey grass. The forlorn sigh of the grass is drowned by the humming of bees over the glistening carpet, and from every flower rises an intense fragrance.

The whole earth is a thurible heaped with incense, afire with the divine, yet not consumed. This is the most spiritual of earth's joys — too subtle for analysis, mysteriously connected with light and with whiteness, for white flowers are sweetest — yet it penetrates the physical being to its depths. Here is a symbol of the material value of spiritual things. If we washed our souls in these healing perfumes as often as we wash our hands, our lives would be infinitely more wholesome. The old herbalists were wise in their simplicity in the making of marigold potions, medicaments of herbs, soothing unguents from melilot and musk-mallow, elecampane and agrimony, pillows for the sick from rosemary and basil, beech-leaf mattresses for the weary — for these things cleanse the whole being. 'Golden saxifrage for melancholy, blue vervain for working magic cures,' said the old physicians; and still the shining saxifrage shames the discontented, and the rare blue vervain diffuses magic. The pasque-flower — dark purple, sun-hearted, with its symbolism of the old grief and the young joy that the Christian mystic puts into the word Easter — was given for cataract: it cures a darkness worse than that of the eyes. The Arabs give a fusion of roses for phthisis; the aconite, under her cold, slaty roof, keeps a simple for fevers; from the pink cistus, with its heart of five flames, comes the merciful labdanum. Such things are a cordial for body and soul.

A thousand homely plants send out their oils and resins from the still

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places where they are in touch with vast forces, to heal men of their foulness. They link the places that humanity has made so chokingly dusty with the life-giving airs of the ambrosial meadows — bringing women's heads round quickly and setting people smiling.

Not once only, but every year, the fair young body of the wild rose hangs upon the thorn, redeeming us through wonder, and crying across the fetid haunts of the money-grubbers with volatile sweetness — 'Fatter . . . they know not what they do.'

THE LAND WITHIN

This is a land of forests, and of meres
Stirless and deep, replenished with my tears.
Here the pine harps, and many voices moan
Within the cedar, crying, 'Lone! Alone!'
Sharp on green heaven the green ice peaks arise
Through the deep snows of thawless purities.
Ten thousand stars are drowned within the lake,
Beneath grey ice. And while the branches break,
The million crystals shining there arow
Can never fall, though every tempest blow.
Only the rush, with brown and broken spear,
Tells of the host of summer mustering here,
Where now the reeds, encrusted stiff with glass,
Sound a faint music, faintly sigh 'Alas!'
Where are the birds that with blue flash would make
Traffic between blue sky and bluer lake,
Ripping the water with a long, keen wing,
Then setting rosy breasts arow to sing?
O, they are fled, my soul! Fled far away
To some gold tree in Spain or Africa.

Was there a sound of leaves here once, and streams
Gurgling on pebbles? (In dreams, my soul! in dreams.)
Galleons of golden lilies then could ride
Safely, though coot and moorhen stirred the tide,
Swimming with all their young; and loud sweet cries
Fell from the mountains where the curlew haunted
Green mossy cwms, sun-drenched and thrice enchanted;
And somewhere in the lake's confused reflections,
Remote and fair as childhood's recollections,
Smothered in wavering lilac leaves, and blurred
With bloom, the shadow of a gable stirred
With every tide, and a twisted chimney flowered
In pale blue smoke, that in the water towered
Downward. And through those deeps, pillared and aisled,
Came a brown woodman, and a boy who smiled,

THE LAND WITHIN

Running towards the shifting wicket-gate,
And waved an under-water hand, to spy
One leaning from the casement — that was I.

Where was that cottage with its lilac trees,
Its windows wide, its garden drowsed with bees?
Where stood the echoing glade whence the faggot came
To turn the evening hours to one warm flame?
And that brown woodman, where and whence was he —
That woodman, with the eyes that dazzled me
Far more than rosy fire or golden gleams
Of April? O, in dreams, my soul! in dreams.

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST



CHAPTER ONE

DORMER

DORMER Old House stood amid the remnants of primeval woodland that curtained the hills. These rose steeply on all sides of the house, which lay low by the water in the valley. This was called Oolert's Dingle, and there were plenty of owls to justify the name. On a moonlit night, passing, high up, from side to side of the cuplike valley, they looked like breeze-blown feathers. Higher still, on the very rim of the cup, the far-travelled winds shouted across to one another, all winter, news of the world. When the bats slipped from their purlicues in the cobwebby out-buildings and climbed toward this rim, they had to ascend step after grey step of the windless air, and only attained their ambition after long flying.

From these heights, in fine weather, the house and its gardens lay open to the view, small but clear, beside the white thread that was Dormer brook. The place had been patched and enlarged by successive generations, very much as man's ideas are altered, the result in both cases being the same — a mansion to the majority, a prison to the few. On clear evenings, when the westerling sun struck up the valley and set the win-



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M A C C R A K L I

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dows on fire, one could see the centuries in the house, like ferns in a fossil. There was the timbered black-and-white centre, once the complete house, with diamond lattices and the unassuming solidity of an Elizabethan manor; there was the small Queen Anne wing on the left — one room down and two up — built by a rich ancestor of the Darke family; there was the solemn, Georgian porch with its rounded, shell-like roof and Grecian pillars. The right wing, hideously stuccoed, consisted of one large room with many-paned sash-windows and a steep red roof, and had been built by the father of Solomon Darke, the present owner. At the back, perilously clinging to the Elizabethan farm, was an ancient cottage, which seemed to be the nucleus of the whole, and was built of stone and thatched. When the ambitious Elizabethan set about building his manor, no doubt the two bottle-glass windows of this cottage eyed him reproachfully, as a Vandal and a despiser of his ancestors. It was neglected now, and remained, weighed down by the large-leaved ivy, haunted by its whisper year after year, and used only by Enoch, the gardener, who stored apples there, and by the mice, who consumed the apples. The house, as a whole, had something of a malignant air, as of an old ruler from whom senility takes the power, but not the will, for tyranny.

All these things you could see in clear weather; but when it was misty — and mist lingered here as of inalienable right — the house was obliterated. It vanished like a pebble in a well, with all its cabined and shuttered wraths and woes, all its thunderous 'thou shalt not's'. At such times it did not seem that any law ruled in the valley except the law of the white owls and the hasty water and the mazy bat-dances. Only those who slept there night by night could tell you that the house was overspread with a spider's-web of rules, legends and customs so complex as to render the individual soul almost helpless. It is the mass-ego that constructs dogmas and laws; for while the individual soul is, if free at all, self-poised, the mass-mind is always uncertain, driven by vague, wandering aims; conscious, in a dim fashion, of its own weakness, it builds round itself a grotesque structure in the everlastingness of which it implicitly believes. When each unit of humanity merges itself in the mass, it loses its bearings and must rely on externals. The whole effort of evolution is to the development of individual souls who will dare to be free of the architecture of crowd-morality. For when man is herded, he remembers the savage.

Round the House of Dormer stood the forest, austere aloof. The upper woods had never known the shuddering horror of the axe, the bitter and incurable destruction of the day when gnomes of ugly aspect are let loose with flashing weapons among the haughty sons and daughters

of the gods, hacking and tearing at the steadfast forms of beauty, until beauty itself seems to have crashed earthwards. Successive Darkes had threatened to fell the forest; but there was always plenty of wood from the reaping of the storms and from trees that fell from the rottenness of great age; so they had let it alone. The trees looked down upon time-shattered hulks of others in every stage of gentle decay. There were some mouldered trunks yet standing with a twig or two of green on them, especially among the yews, which must have weathered the winters of a thousand years. Others were of such antiquity that only a jagged point showed where once the leaf-shadows flickered on the wolf litters. Among these giants in their prime and in their dignified dissolution rise on all sides in supple grace the young trees and saplings. From the lissim creature that only needed the gradual massing of maturity to make its beauty perfect, down to the baby stem with two absurd, proudly-waving leaves, all took part in that slow attainment of perfection through stages of beauty on which all Nature seems intent. They stood, rank on rank, with rounded or pointed tops, their foliage sometimes heavy and solemn, as in the yew and the oak, sometimes fluffy as in the elm, or transparent and showing the sky through its traceries as in birch and larch. They seemed to peer at the house over one another's shoulders like people looking at something grotesque, not with blame or praise, but in a kind of disdainful indifference.

For it does not seem that Nature, as some divines would have us think, was built to stage man's miracle plays, or created as an illustration of his various religions. Nature takes no account of man and his curious arts, his weird worships, but remains dark and unresponsive, beetling upon him as he creeps, ant-like, from his momentary past to his doubtful future, painfully carrying his tiny load of knowledge. But indifference is not hampering, as interference is; therefore those that feel within them the stir of a growing soul prefer the dour laws of earth to the drag of the herd of mankind, and fly from the house of man to the forest, where the emotionless silence always seems to be gathering, as waves mount and swell, to the disclosure of a mystery.



CHAPTER TWO

THE FAMILY AT SUPPER

THE Darke had just finished supper, the event of the day. The red woollen bell-rope still swung from Peter's onslaught; for when, at Mrs. Darke's morose order 'Ring for Sarah,' he kicked his chair aside and strode across the room, he always seemed to wreak a suppressed fury on the bell-rope, and more than once the tarnished rose to which it hung had been torn from the wall.

'The room. Drat it!' said Sarah in the kitchen, like a person proposing a toast.

Armed with a large tin tray, she burst into the dining-room. Clearing was, in her hands, a belligerent enterprise in which her usual sulky manner in the presence of her mistress gave place to more open hostility. She wrested the plates from their owners, and had been known to leave Ruby, who liked two helpings, stranded, with no plate for her last fruit stones. To-night it was Mr. Darke who cried, 'Howd yer, Sarah!' and clung to his plate.

'Don't say "Howd yer!" like any old waggoner, Solomon!' Mrs. Darke spoke with exasperation.

'Waggoner, Solomon!' echoed a less irritated, thinner, more tiresome voice, that of Mrs. Darke's mother, Mrs. Velindre.

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Solomon Darke, a man of sixty, sat with his shoulders bent; his jaw, of the kind sometimes called 'jowl', rested on his Gladstone collar and large 'made' tie. The expressionless heaviness of his face was redeemed by something of the patience of oxen, and rendered intimidating by a hint of the bull-dog in the mouth's ferocious tenacity. It was obvious that his one idea in any crisis would be to resort to physical force. Between him and Peter sat Catherine Velindre, a distant relation who lived at Dormer as a paying guest, calling Solomon and his wife 'uncle' and 'aunt' as terms of respect. Her pointed face, her chestnut hair, demurely parted and pinned round her head in a large plait, her small and thin-lipped mouth, might have belonged to a Chaucerian nun. But her eyes were not those of a nun; they were too restless. They were peculiarly long, of the type called almond-shaped with very little curve in them; the lids, being large and heavily-lashed, added to the air of secrecy and awareness that was Catherine Velindre's chief expression.

In extreme contrast with Catherine were Ruby Darke, a tall, plump, pretty girl of eighteen who was sprawling across the table, and her elder sister, Amber, who was in no way a success according to Dormer standards. Her manner, when she was at ease, had charm, but it was spoilt by shyness. Her hair was of an indeterminate brown, and her complexion was ruined by ill-health, due to the perpetual chafing of the wistful mind longing for things not in Dormer.

Peter, black-eyed, silent in the presence of his parents, and — for all his twenty years — full of the sullenness of early adolescence, had the look of a creature gathered for a spring, but he was without sufficient concentration to know in what direction he wished to go or what he wanted to grasp. The air of repression which brooded over the family, putting a constraint on emotion and impulse, seemed to act as an irritant to Peter. He was vaguely aware of something inimical, as animals are, but he knew nothing about atmosphere and would have flushed scarlet if anyone had spoken to him of emotion.

Peter, Ruby, Amber and Jasper — who was not here to-night — came by their names in a curious way. Mrs. Darke had been so bored by the advent of each child (for she had married Solomon not because she loved him, but because she hated the Velindre household) that she had refused to think of any names for them. There had been many long silent conflicts when her husband sat, moody and obstinate, staring at the mute bundle in the majestic cradle which was a Darke heirloom, and saying at long intervals 'Give it a name, Rachel!'

Mrs. Darke, equally obstinate, on her large sofa with its uncomfortable

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ornaments of carved mahogany leaves, silently tore calico. The argument, wordless on one side, always ended without a name having been found; and, though Solomon's nerves were those of a ploughman, they at last became irritated by the harsh, regular tearing, and by that in his wife's character which lay behind the tearing and caused it.

'What are you making, tearing so?' he would ask angrily. And she would reply, like scissors snapping, 'Binders!'

Afterwards Solomon generally took his gun and strolled towards the Rectory, which was at some distance from the church and the House of Dormer. The Rectory, a few cottages and an immense, overbearing rookery made up the village. Entering the Rector's study with a couple of rabbits pendent in his hand, Solomon would say sheepishly:

'Give it a name, Rector!'

Now the Rector was an authority on seals and gems. Nobody knew why he had given his life to this study, but it was generally felt at Dormer that he was an honour to the village and must be known all over the world. As Mr. Mallow, the constable and chief member of the choir, said with unintentional irony, 'The Rector's got a powerful burden of learning, and he's first in that line, no danger, for who else ever wanted to know about a stone?'

After these visits of Solomon the Rector would spend a happy morning, poring over his list of jewels, and — having dined frugally on the rabbits — would write a long, allusive letter to Solomon in beautiful pointed script. Solomon, having extracted the name from it, would light his pipe with it and say to his wife in an off-hand tone:

'What d'you think of Amber, Ruby, or Jasper?'

Whereupon Mrs. Darke said:

'That's the Rector!' and Solomon was very crestfallen.

Rachel Darke was grimly amused that her children should be called by the names of precious stones; but to protest would have been to upset her attitude of aloofness. Three gems headed the family, but, when the Rector suggested 'Garnet' for the fourth, Solomon rebelled and said:

'Call him Peter. It was good enough for his grandfather.'

The Rector comforted himself with the reflection that Peter, a rock, was only a jewel in the rough, and Peter had been true to this from his cradle. As Mrs. Cantlop, the Rector's cousin, said with one of her helpless sighs, 'Peter's such a *knobby* baby!' Mrs. Cantlop knew the children's idiosyncrasies far better than Mrs. Darke did. She knew that Ruby could absorb the crudest paint from her toys and still flourish; that Amber, though an ailing child, was always ready to gurgle into laughter; that

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Jasper, even at the age of three, required reasons for obeying an order, and that he would, after pondering on them, behave 'like a Christian lamb'. She knew also, though neither Mrs. Darke nor Mrs. Velindre noticed it, that Catherine, from the moment of her first arrival — white-pinafores, reserved — ruled the nursery. Of all the children, Peter was most like his mother. He had the same long obstinate chin and the same smouldering black eyes.

To-night, while Sarah clattered at the sideboard, Mrs. Darke sat staring at the tablecloth, drumming on it with her long, restless fingers. She was just beyond the circle of lamplight, and the dimness made her seem even taller than she was. Her thin lips, very pale and straight, were closed with almost painful firmness. Her forehead was covered with lines, both vertical and horizontal, and an expression of frigidity combined with exasperation made her face sinister.

Away from the table, in an arm-chair by the fire, sat Mrs. Velindre. She was grotesquely like her daughter. She had the same close-set black eyes, long pale face and lined forehead; but her eyes had no expression. If one penetrated them, there seemed to be something stealthily in wait behind them. It was like walking in a lonely wood and becoming aware of something running in and out among the trees, silent, invisible, and gradually being convinced that it is a ghost. There was a ghost hiding in Mrs. Velindre's eyes — a cadaverous, grisly thing which had looked at her out of other people's eyes when she was a child; slowly possessing her in womanhood; finally absorbing her whole personality — eating into it like a worm into a rotten fruit. As she sat, hour after hour, in her high, straight chair, with her white cap and black ringlets, two on each side, this ghost brooded with bat-like wings above her failing mind and endowed her with something of awe, something that proclaimed her kin to the ancient gods of vengeance and slaughter. For in her, more than in any other at Dormer, except her daughter, the herd panic, which drives man to be more cruel to his brother than are the wild beasts, held undisputed dominion. As a young woman she had known generous instincts, but now, at eighty, she could have refused without a qualm the request of a dying man, if he disagreed with her religious views. Yet she could scarcely be blamed. She had lived so long by fear and not by love, that her capacity for cruelty had grown in proportion to her capacity for panic. She had for so many years been trying to be like other people, that she was now like nothing in heaven or earth. For the more a soul conforms to the sanity of others, the more does it become insane. By continually doing violence to its own laws, it finally loses the power of governing itself.

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Mrs. Velindre, who was the oracle of the family, never used either intellect or intuition in giving her verdicts. She simply echoed her ancestors. If anything occurred without precedent in her tradition, she was flustered and incompetent, until she had found some text which could be made to bear on the question. Then she would give her ultimatum.

Beneath the hanging lamp, which lit the large room vaguely, the six faces, drawn in heavy chiaroscuro against the brown wall-paper, shone out dimly as from an old picture. They might have belonged to a pre-renaissance Italian family or a household newly converted to Calvinism. But though they might have belonged to any country or period, they could only, it was clear, belong to one spiritual atmosphere. Perhaps it was the weight of this atmosphere that gave the room its medieval gloom. For the kernel of medievalism was fear — of God, devils, man, and all the laws, customs and fetishes invented by man. And this antique negation seemed to find in the House of Dormer a congenial dwelling. Thick shadows clung to the ceiling like hovering night-birds, eliminating the corners and all furniture not within the lamp's radius, obscuring detail and giving the room a measure of gloomy dignity.

'I wish Jasper would come!' said Amber suddenly. 'He's late.'

'It would be almost better,' said Mrs. Darke, 'if Jasper never came at all.'

'Wicked! A wicked boy! Never came at all,' muttered grandmother.

'He isn't, Grandmother!' Amber was all on fire with wrath and love.

'Don't contradict your elders,' said Mrs. Darke. 'It is very tiresome of Jasper, with Ernest taking the curacy here, to come home an infidel.'

'D'you mean to say we've got to have that fool Ernest living here?' queried Solomon.

'I do. He is to be a paying guest.'

'Lord! The house'll be like to bust.'

'*Burst! Burst!*' corrected Mrs. Darke in exasperation.

'*Burst!*' echoed grandmother from the fireside.

'Bust!' repeated Solomon.

Peter guffawed. Any defiance of authority was a refreshment to his tethered spirit. Amber was pink with suppressed laughter. Her grandmother's voice was so like that of a distant, ruminative bird answering a near bird, and her father's explosiveness was so funny and excusable that her perpetually simmering glee at the humours of life almost boiled over. A strain of what Mrs. Darke called vulgarity in her husband was one of his most lovable qualities in Amber's eyes. She always suspected it of being at least half compounded of humour.

Catherine looked pained.

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'Really, Solomon, I wish you wouldn't be so vulgar!' said his wife. 'What've I said? Bust! Well, the house *will* bust. It won't hold Jasper and Ernest together.'

Sarah, at the sideboard, gave a smothered chuckle.

'Sarah! I said, clear!' Mrs. Darke spoke with incisive anger.

'Clear!' came the faithful echo from the hearth.

Sarah, with subdued passion, concluded her enterprise and was heard dealing hardly with the crockery in the kitchen.

'Aren't you going to have any supper left, mamma?' asked Ruby.

'I am not.'

'What a welcome!' cried Amber.

'Is it a time for welcome?'

'A time to dance and a time to weep . . .' quoted Mrs. Velindre, with the buoyancy given by the knowledge of having made a quotation to the point.

'I don't see that poor Jasper can expect a very cordial welcome, after his behaviour,' said Catherine.

At that moment Sarah was heard roaring (there was no other possible description of Sarah's voice when raised), 'The gun-dogs' supper's ready, sir!'

'The dogs get supper — the very dogs!' Ruby spoke obstinately.

'The dogs eat of the crumbs!' said grandmother, again buoyant.

'The dogs will enjoy their supper, won't they, father?' asked Amber.

'Ay, ay. They mop it up.'

'Jasper will be hungry, Father.'

But Solomon had gone. He would not be drawn into open hostilities with his wife.

'Jasper deserves to be hungry,' said grandmother.

'Why must a fellow starve because he's expelled?' cried Peter angrily. 'If the old fools expel him, it's their look-out; it's not his fault.'

'What is Jasper's fault,' said Catherine softly, 'is the sin of denying his Maker.'

Peter was silenced. He was susceptible to physical beauty, and, in the absence of more obvious charms, those of his cousin held him. The devout air, the 'preachy' sentence that he would have ridiculed in his sisters, he admired in Catherine. By one of the ironies of things, Catherine's religious words and looks were acceptable, not because they were real, but because she looked and spoke with the eyes and lips of a courtesan. Not that Catherine was anything but innocent and ignorant; she was virginal to the point of exasperation; but there was something cold in the allure

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of her eyes, something knife-like in her smile, that recalled the loveless sisterhood. Grandmother spoke again:

'A jealous God!' she said in her most sepulchral voice. 'A jealous God!'

'If he doesn't think there's a God, how can he say there is?' Peter asked irascibly. It was easy to see that he did not argue for a principle, but because arguing was an outlet for his volcanic dislike of things in general.

'Why not just say there is and be comfy?' murmured Ruby sleepily.

Mrs. Darke turned and looked at her, and the look was enough to wither her. But Ruby was not of the easily wilted souls. She was a com-
plaisant creature. She returned her mother's look contentedly, ruminatively, and went on eating apples. Catherine watched her.

'You eat a great many apples,' she remarked.

'That's why she has such a lovely complexion,' said Amber.

Catherine's eyes, narrow and lustrous, came round upon Amber, who immediately became conscious of her own bad complexion.

She looked round the room, wishing she could make it more homelike for Jasper. Dormer was not a comfortable house, though there were plenty of material necessities. No one need ever be hungry; but no meal ever partook of the nature of a sacrament. Amber often thought wearily that here food and drink were only so much solid and liquid matter put into the body in order to strengthen it so that it should once more acquire solid and liquid matter. In many a poor home she had seen a light that never shone at Dormer; seen the chalice lifted in whose mingled wine is agony and ecstasy; heard those bells pealing out into the rainy, windy night of time which swing only in the mysterious belfries of the human heart. Sometimes when she came late through the village she would see an oblong of crocus light that seemed to come not only from the cheap lamp and the carefully tended fire. It might be a young wife who stood in the doorway, while the eldest child, with stern concentration, wielded the toasting fork. Or an old woman strained her faded eyes to embrace with their love the old man coming heavily up the path. When these vanished into the soft glow that was their rightful country, Amber was filled with a strange, wild longing. Once she talked of this to Ruby, and she was so wistful that Ruby cried: 'I'll make *you* toast, Ambie! Yes, I will — scold who may!' In her childish way she strove for the inner grace by first attaining the outer sign. The toast caused trouble, but Ruby had a capacity for obstinacy, and the war of the toasting-fork became an institution. But the Dormer meals still failed to be sacraments.

To-night the room looked exactly as usual. Catherine had brought out one of her hobbies, a device by which ink was sprayed through a wire

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comb by a tooth-brush on to white cardboard where ferns had been pinned. The resulting white fern silhouettes were varnished and made into blotters for bazaars. Catherine pinned the ferns on with great precision, but Amber preferred Ruby's blotters, which were blotters in every sense. The ink, in Ruby's hands, seemed to become exceedingly wet, and the spray, which should have been fine as pepper, ran into pools. Amber, seeing Ruby's large hands doubtfully poised over the work, her indeterminate mouth slightly open, sometimes thought that Catherine — near, competent, her dark eyes slanted amusedly towards Ruby — willed her to make blots. To-night the regular, metallic brushing worried Amber. She wanted to think about Jasper, but the room was full of small irritating sounds. Listening to them, it seemed to her that they were the essence of the people that made them — each little noise the complaint of the spirit within. Peter was whittling elderwood for whistles, drawing his breath through his teeth meanwhile. Mrs. Velindre's four steel knitting needles made a nervous undersong to the brushing. Ruby's regular munching was occasionally drowned by a rending noise as Mrs. Darke tore rags to stuff cushions. This sound predominated over the others because of its very relentlessness. Each tear was a momentary shriek. No one spoke for a long time. They seldom talked over their evening employments. When Solomon came in, Amber felt grateful to him because his amusement was a silent one. Every evening except Sunday he read *The Golden Chance*, a paper consisting chiefly of puzzles, graded for varying intellects. Some required the creation of a complete couplet of verse. Solomon looked askance at these. Others only needed an intuitive knowledge as to which lady would marry which gentleman in a line of pictured heads. But by some black decree of fate Solomon was never able to win a prize. Each Saturday, when he depressedly ascertained that he had again failed, Amber loved him more passionately. She resolved that next week he should win if she had to sit up all night. But she was not good at puzzles. She thought the man with a box-like chin would marry the hectic lady; Solomon was sure he loved the lady with the excessively developed figure; whereas the perfidious young man really burned for her of the diamonds. 'We might have known!' Solomon would say gloomily, and Amber always wished that she wasn't too reserved to throw her arms round him. She used to wish the same when Peter came home from school as a tiny boy with a bad report. To-night she wished it more intensely about Jasper. For he had made in the eyes of Dormer a signal failure. None of his puzzles had come right. His riddle remained unguessed. She remembered him as a small boy having been placed on the

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stool of repentance by Mrs. Cantlop — who had taught them all till they outstripped her in knowledge, which happened early — and standing there insecurely in a curious little yellow tunic, his shoulders humpy with a sense of injustice. When she remembered Jasper's keen love of fairness, the wild rages that shook him at the lack of it; when she thought how he would come home to-night, already frayed to breaking point by the failure of the world of college to see his side of the question, she felt dismayed. She knew exactly how they would all look at Jasper, how the souls would lean out from their faces like crowds watching a criminal — grandmother peering, Mrs. Darke glaring, Ruby and Peter curious, her father glowering, Catherine hyper-critical. Her hemming grew large and wild.

'Father?' she said questioningly.

'Um?' Solomon looked up from the page he was poring over.

'When will he be here?'

The question had been quite different, but the room was too strong for her; she fell back upon time. Time was a god at Dormer. Clocks ticked in every room with fury or with phlegmatic dogmatism, and their striking-cut through every conversation. Mrs. Velindre's grandfather clock was especially dictatorial. At five minutes to the hour it hiccupped, and, when people had just forgotten this, it gave forth the hour in deliberate and strident tones that only ceased at five minutes past; so that it cynically took ten minutes from every sixty in order to preach the flectingness of time. Mrs. Darke owned a black marble timepiece like a tomb, which ticked irritably on the cold black marble mantelpiece in the dining-room. In the hall was a tall clock which chimed and would have been pleasant if the chimes had not been slightly cracked. Sarah possessed a cuckoo clock, which shouted as unemotionally as if it knew that here at Dormer its cry did not mean summer. In all the bedrooms were alarums, bee clocks, carriage clocks. To anyone standing in the hall on a quiet afternoon, the multiple whisper of all these time-keepers was very ghostly. They rustled like autumn leaves; they hushed the living into the sleep of death. They increased Amber's feeling that Dormer was too full of people; for, where man is massed, there he seems doomed to live by rule and by time. Those who dare to be themselves are not so bounded. For the lover time is changeable; a moment of absence wears on him like a year, and a year with the beloved is gone like a falling star. For the mystic also time does not exist; already he dreams into eternity. When man is self-poised, he awakes from the hallucinations of time and law, and stealing out into the silence of his own being hears a voice sound beyond

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mortality, telling him that place and time are but bubbles; that the nervous counting of moments and years is foolish; that he is free and has never been in prison, since the walls that he thought loomed about him, strong and opaque, are nothing; that he is, even now, one with the immense freedom in which these bubbles float.

Solomon looked at the marble clock. 'Not for twenty minutes. Enoch's slow,' he replied. 'And what I say is, the lad should have thought of the family. What's it matter what *he* thinks? God's God. The Saviour's the Saviour. Anyone that denies it — tar 'im and feather 'im!'

Amber was puzzled. She herself would have been willing to assent to any dogma for the sake of one she loved, for she felt that to sacrifice the human being who was dear to her for a creed, an idea, would be criminal. In her, love had a way of flaring up like a beacon, changing the world and consuming even herself. But she knew that Jasper would regard this as lying. As she recalled his sensitive, scornful face, the heinousness of what he had done faded before a sense of romance. He had been out into strange places. He had fought a ghostly warfare on the shadowy slopes of the soul. Had he lost or won? Lost, was the verdict of Dormer; but Amber dared to think not.

'I admire Jasper for not being afraid to say what he thinks,' she said, conscious of temerity.

'Admire!' cried Catherine, with pretty horror.

'Admire!' echoed grandmother subterraneously. Mrs. Darke said nothing, but her spirit seemed to weigh on them all like an iceberg silently pressing upon a ship. Her silence was alarming. The less she said, the more she seemed to say. Sometimes it seemed as if she were a ventriloquist, and talked through her mother. So when Amber, almost in tears, beating herself against the blank wall of their imperviousness as the winter robins would beat against the Dormer windows in terror at finding themselves in prison, cried: 'Yes! Admire! It's brave of him to tell the truth!' — it was grandmother who looked bleakly across the room, gripping her needles of polished steel with fingers of polished bone, and said: 'Jasper, until he repents, is damned.' Her voice, with its metallic lack of emotion, seemed to hack the air and leave it jagged. Solomon breathed stertorously over his puzzle; even Ruby felt the tension, and sighed. No one contradicted grandmother. The room, with its heavy shadows, fell again into silence.

Sarah's activities had died away in the kitchen, and the house lay dumb under the night. To Amber it seemed that its quiet had the quality of the spider, mutely awaiting the faintly vocal fly. As she thought it, a soft

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regular sound became audible, the fateful sound of a horse trotting. She sprang up with a defensive feeling and went into the hall. As she pulled open the heavy door, the voice of the stream, swollen by the autumn rains, smote upon her suddenly, full of sad foreboding. It was deepened by the low, sonorous sound of the Four Waters, half a mile away — a monotonous and bee-like note that seemed to have been struck before the beginning of time. Dormer, in its cup at the bases of the hills, was always full of damp air and the sound of water. Besieged by this grievous music — and what is there in nature sadder than the lament of falling water? — she felt as if she had opened the door not to the night and the stream, but on to a future full of doubt and dread, veiled in mist.

She went back into the hall. Jasper could not be here for a few minutes, and she found the light reassuring. From the dining-room came Mrs. Velindre's voice reading passages from *The Lion of the Tribe of Judah*, a paper which dealt exclusively with the vexed question of the lost tribes. She persisted in regarding the Jews not as one of the finest nations the world has seen, but as people requiring a missionary. This paper was her spiritual and intellectual fodder, and she read it nightly, with praiseworthy perseverance, to a totally indifferent family. She also read it to Sarah while she lit her fire on winter mornings, and Sarah had been heard to say that 'if the tribes must be daft and mislay themselves, she wished they'd mislay themselves for good and all, and not like hunt the thimble — no sooner lost than it's werrit, werrit, werrit to find it.' But it was useless for Sarah to rattle the fire-irons; useless for the family to talk in raised voices; for grandmother had a voice of great carrying power when she liked, and she was not afraid of using it. The good seed was sown. To-night it was being sown. Jasper's arrival was unmarked, whether by design or accident Amber did not know. She opened the door again and heard the wheels suddenly muffled as the gig turned into the sandy drive. She had put on her best frock, a white cashmere, old-fashioned in make, and she showed as a thin, insignificant figure between the large brown hall and the large blue night.

So deeply had her genius for loving been stirred by Jasper's forlorn condition — she knew he would be unspeakably forlorn at Dormer; so greatly had the innate chivalry of the individualist (who believes in the essential beauty that is beneath the froth of action, speech and motive) been aroused by hearing the absent abused, that it almost seemed as if she might triumph over the constrictions of Dormer and express herself to Jasper.

'My dear! oh, my dear!' she whispered, as Enoch, with a 'Be good, pony!' drew up at the door, and Jasper jumped out.

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He kissed her perfunctorily, looked restlessly past her into the hall, and said:

'Where's Catherine?'

Amber, alone in the porch, twisting her hands together with a crushing sense of failure and futility, murmured with a kind of smouldering passion, 'Oh, I *wish* I were his mother!'

She was realizing the perpetual denial of spiritual truth by crude fact. She was feeling that it was of no avail that she loved Jasper maternally, protectingly, perceptively. He would neither expect nor welcome these things from her. From Catherine he would expect them but would he get them? From Mrs. Darke he would not even expect them. Amber raged, but her rage consumed herself only. For in the House of Dormer, with its hollow-echoing chambers, ascendancy is given to bodily and not spiritual ties; to propinquity and not affinity; to the shout of the crowd and not the faint, far voice of the soul.

Jasper disappeared in the gloomy doorway, and Amber, with the second-sight that always comes to those who ponder anxiously upon a loved one, knew, at least in part, what he must endure; she guessed also that her conflict for his happiness with the personality of the House, with the thing that hung, like a haunting demon, from the old roof-tree, would be long and hard and would perhaps bring defeat in the end.



CHAPTER THREE

JASPER COMES HOME

JASPER stood in the dining-room doorway and thought that the room looked like a cave — a dark cave from which anything might emerge, devils or angels. As he thought this he was gazing at Catherine. As a little boy, he had adored the tall white resurrection angel on its golden background in Amber's Sunday book. He had been unusually fond of church and of Bible pictures, and, while Peter was busy in the kitchen, salting the raisins with which Sarah enlivened her Sabbath, he would be wrapt in contemplation of the resurrection angel. Now, having discarded angels, he needed something to put in their place. His mind had not yet cast away the old religious phraseology. Perhaps the hardest thing from which to break free in being born to the life of individual honesty is this protecting caul of ancient phrases and observances. To Jasper's temperament these were peculiarly dear. At his first communion, when the Rector had read the plaintive 'In the same night that He was betrayed . . .' Jasper had sobbed, and Mrs. Velindre, who was there in an armour of solemnity that frightened him, had eyed him suspiciously, thinking that he had a secret sin.

The dark sweetness of eucharistic dawns, the spiritual vitality of Christianity's best ideals — these he had resigned. But there, in the restricted lamp-light, with demure, down-bent head and bright hair, bound in the manner of religious art, was Catherine Velindre, tangible and beautiful.

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Her white hands, just plump enough to be graceful, moved to and fro quietly. Her shoulders, which sloped a good deal beneath her dark silk blouse, gave her an air of fragility and gentleness. It seemed to Jasper that her face broke upon him like a radiant landscape seen from a forest, or a flower thrown from a dark window. He had always been rather sentimental about Catherine. That Peter also was, though only by fits and starts, encouraged him. So also did the fact that his elders thought it 'very suitable' that she should marry Peter; for Catherine possessed a small independent income which would help the Dormer property, to which it was arranged that Peter should succeed, Jasper having chosen the church. Her money was a barrier in Jasper's eyes. He wished she were a beggar and he the lord of the manor. He thought her face would be adorable in a ragged setting, like the crescent moon on a wild night. He had always been eager to be her lover, but to-night he began to care for her in an intenser way. He put her in the empty niche in his spiritual life and took her for his guardian angel, who was to lead him along hard paths by the fascination of sheer whiteness. She would smile down at him in his journey for Truth; she would be proud of him when he gave up material welfare for conscience' sake.

He had an idea that they would all be proud of him, though possibly deprecating his views. During the uproar at the training college, which followed his outburst, during the sleepless nights when he mourned his cherished future (he had wanted to be a scholarly, cultured, yet practical vicar of some huge wicked parish which he was to convert) in the midst of exasperating misconstruction of his motives; in all these he had comforted himself with the thought that Catherine, and in a lesser degree the rest of the home people, would know that his motives had been of the highest. He had thought that they would all agree that honesty was the one course open to him. So little do we know the personalities with which we are most intimate!

Jasper looked very handsome, very vital, very young, and therefore very pathetic, standing in the dusk beyond the furthest lamp-ray. His eyes dwelt eagerly and dreamily on Catherine, until he suddenly remembered that he had not, in Dormer phraseology, 'been the rounds'. The curious coldness of his reception was rather lost upon him, he was so dazzled by the halo he had just created for Catherine, the beauty of which he ascribed entirely to her, and not at all to his own imagination.

Mrs. Darke silently suffered his embrace; but so she always did. Ruby gave him one of her indifferent, wet kisses. Peter said 'Hullo!' which was for him, demonstrative. Then, just as he reached Catherine, his



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father looked up and said the sentence he had hammered out as being suitable.

'I'd have been better pleased to see you for a better reason.'

Grandmother raised her head, and Amber, tearful in the hall, thought that she looked, with her small, bright eyes, like a snake about to strike.

'Why hast thou brought down my grey hairs?' queried grandmother, rather inappositely, for her ringlets were as black as sloes. This was by courtesy of a certain mixture called 'Uz:t', or through lack of the emotions, for the emotions turn more heads grey than does old age. It is not the Isouds and the Teresas of the world that conserve their youth, but the Aphrodites.

'I've done nothing to be ashamed of,' said Jasper. Mrs. Darke looked up.

'You have sinned against the Holy Ghost!'

'Ghost — ghost!' muttered Mrs. Velindre.

'There's no such person,' said Jasper, defiant because he was alarmed at his own daring.

'Blasphemer!' Mrs. Darke eyed her son with what an onlooker, who did not know their relationship, would have called venom.

Jasper stuck out his chin; it was long, like his mother's.

'Blasphemer against what? Sinner against what?' he asked with exasperation. 'You can't blaspheme against a lie.'

Solomon flung *The Golden Chance* across the room and banged his fist on the table.

'Silence, sir!' he shouted.

'Father,' said Jasper, his voice shaking with passion and disappointment, 'I won't be silent. It's lying to say I believe the idiotic hotch-potch of the churches.'

'Silence!' roared Solomon again.

'Oh, why does Jasper rub them up the wrong way?' whispered Amber.

'I won't be treated like a naughty boy!' said Jasper furiously.

'A naughty boy! Yes! A very naughty boy!' said grandmother. 'When I was young, caning was the cure.'

Grandmother had been brought up on 'Cautionary Tales for the Young'.

'Yes, a good stout stick'll find God for most of 'em,' remarked Solomon, adding with an air of great reasonableness, 'God's God.'

'Oh, can't you understand? Won't you understand?' Jasper's voice was pleading.

'We understand,' said Mrs. Darke, 'that you must have done something wicked and don't *want* to believe.'

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Jasper's lips quivered. So they thought all his spiritual conflicts mere fleshly lusts! This misconception irritated him as much as it hurt him.

'You're not angry with me because I don't believe in God,' he said, 'but because I'm different from you.'

He had hit upon the truth. What they hated him for — and Mrs. Darke's feeling, like Mrs. Velindre's, did reach a silent vindictiveness — was that he had disparted himself from the gelatinous mass of the social ego, as the one live moth from a heap of dead larvæ. Their quarrel with him was wholly material, though it was disguised as a spiritual warfare. (Grandmother often referred to herself as one of a militant band warring against 'Midian', an impersonal and mysterious foe as to whose identity no one ever evinced the slightest curiosity.) It was the inchoate obstructing formative power; the inert pressing down upon life. They were not aware of it, but Jasper saw it, and it made him miserable. If he could have felt that his father and mother and grandmother and all the hostile faces he glimpsed beyond them were really fighting for an ideal, however dim and rudimentary, he would have been able to respect them, and even like them, though they tore him to pieces. There would also have been the chance that they were right, that they might convince him. He would have liked to be convinced of some of the things they professed to believe. Failing that, a definite adversary, a hope of either victory or defeat, would have been welcome. What more could a young man ask? Jasper asked it, but he did not get it. An amorphous mass is not definite; it gives no hope of anything but blind, aimless struggling. He was horrified at his sudden vision of the vast crowd-egoism which says: 'You are not as we, so we crush you.' He felt this in grandmother's eyes when she gazed owlishly upon him out of her twilight. Still more he felt it reaching out to him from his mother's mind. She had no need to speak or look. It was enough that she was in the room; the silent air grew sinister with an unspoken threat.

'Different?' said Solomon slowly. 'Ay, you are, more's the pity.'

'Well, Father, that's how the world gets on. You go a step higher than your father. I go a step higher than you.'

'Conceited ass!' Peter spoke roughly. He was annoyed that Jasper could talk above his head.

Jasper turned on him furiously, and their eyes met across Catherine's bent head with mutual antipathy. Jasper despised Peter as a reactionary and a lover of the fleshpots of orthodoxy. Peter disliked Jasper because he had more imagination than himself. Each, feeling the atmosphere of the house lowering over him, mistrusted the other. Left to themselves, they

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would probably have been interested in each other's differences. At least, they would have been tolerant. But an inimical atmosphere creates quarrels.

Catherine raised her eyes to Jasper's.

'Who put those dreadful ideas into your head, Jasper?' she asked. 'You can't have thought of them yourself.'

'Why not?'

He looked at her pleadingly with his brilliant hazel eyes. As she watched him, Peter slowly lost his lustre for her. Yes, Jasper was distinguished. There was something in his face that had not been there a few months ago, that was not in any of the other faces round the table. She could not exactly name it, not understanding that it was the essence of Jasper's being, unveiling itself to her. What she did see very clearly was that he would have been a great success in the Church. 'Not a miserable little backstairs curate,' she reflected, 'nor a fat fool like Ernest Swyndle. He would have been asked everywhere. He would have ended with a bishopric. Idiot! Theatrical idiot! He *shall* end with a bishopric. He shall give up this nonsense, or else —' the tip of her tongue just moistened the corners of her pointed mouth — 'or else he shall be punished. He shall suffer.'

'You are too nice for such silly ideas,' she said. 'Tell me who talked to you about them?'

'I thought things out for myself,' said Jasper patiently. 'To anyone else he would have been haughty. But I have got a friend whose views are in most ways the same.'

'Is he expelled, too?'

Jasper shrank into himself at her tone. Then he reflected that Catherine could never be intentionally unkind, and pulled himself together.

'It's no disgrace to be expelled for an idea. He would have been glad to be expelled with me, only he was a lecturer, not a student. He left of his own accord because he disagreed with the Head.'

'What about?'

'Everything. He hates all the things the Head likes, only he keeps his temper better than I do. He's older.'

'Age always tells!' cried grandmother. 'Quality and age go together.'

'A fine chap!' Jasper flushed with enthusiasm. 'He's all for the anarchic state.'

'Anarchists!' Solomon was irate almost to apoplexy. 'Look you, my lad, no more of that. Your thoughts are your own; if you want to be damned, you will be damned —' 'Be damned,' said grandmother, but without expulsive intention.

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‘— But I can and will stop you fouling the house with such talk. Board and lodging you can have, but no more argufying. Behave and stay, or argufy and go. See?’

Jasper saw only too well that life at Dormer was going to be unbearable. He was in the white-hot missionary and martyr stage. His message might be one of negation, but it was none the less precious to him.

‘I won’t be muzzled!’ he cried violently.

‘Mad dogs always are,’ remarked Peter.

Jasper glared at him.

‘I’ll go!’ he said. ‘I’ll go clean away and never see any of you again.’ He choked. The first crepuscular oncoming of the fog of misunderstanding and misconstruction is very hard to bear. When the blackness has engulfed and numbed the soul, rebellion dies and the soul sinks into painless despair.

Catherine laid down her comb and tooth-brush, straightened herself, and looked at Jasper. It would not suit her at all for him to go away. How could she, if he went away, save his soul? She rested her chin on her hands and let her eyes absorb him. He was, for the moment, saturated with, engulfed in her will. He was fascinated and rather alarmed. She had never looked at him like that before. No one seemed to observe them, all being intent on their own interests. Mrs. Darke was tearing a piece of linen in a way that was reminiscent of a cat tearing feathers out of a bird. Catherine’s eyes remained steady, and Jasper, as if drawn by a cord, slowly leaned towards her till, with elbows resting on the table, he almost touched her.

‘Cathy!’ he whispered. ‘Cathy?’

His lips moved and remained parted. The first feverish glow of passion swept over his face, leaving it troubled.

‘Stay — with me!’ she whispered.

‘I can’t, I can’t!’

‘I want you.’

‘They’ll drive me mad if I stay.’

Once more, Catherine submerged him under her gaze. The room was quite silent at the moment.

‘Jehovah!’ said grandmother suddenly. She believed in ejaculatory prayer, and her style was coloured by her literature.

‘Tch!’ said Catherine irritably. But Jasper had heard nothing.

‘I want you to stay more than anything in the world, Jasper. Will you?’

‘I’ll stay if I die for it,’ whispered Jasper.

He knew that there was nothing more solid, iron and soul-destroying

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than an inimical atmosphere. It kills more quickly than fire or sword. It is more ferocious than a wild beast. To live among people who have a false and unfriendly estimate of one's character, who misconstrue motive, against whose changeless prejudice the wretched spirit flings itself in vain — this is a refinement of torture with which few sympathize. The Catherine smiled up at him and the room seemed to grow peaceful again. The sudden outbreak, thunderous and threatening, had sunk to calm. He knew it would come round afresh in the manner of tempest; for the people of Dormer could see only one point of view — their own. This is the hotbed from which strife, national and individual, always springs — narrow mentality, shrivelled emotions, over-weighted with physical strength, brooded upon by a still narrower mentality, that of the past. This, because it is effete, is considered immortal, and has been glorified by man into a god of vengeance.

Jasper, on his side, had the roughness of the conscious outlaw, the élan of the growing plant, the necessitated fierceness of a creature outnumbered. He could see their point of view, but he was afraid to put off his armour of combativeness, and if he had done so there was no common ground where they could have met, for the family never would see his. His virtues were crimes in their eyes, his hopes a madman's raving.

'Ring for prayers!' said Mrs. Darke suddenly.

Peter plunged at the bell. Ruby yawned. Solomon woke up, and in the kitchen 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' came to an abrupt end.



CHAPTER FOUR

NIGHT IN DORMER

DURING prayers Amber could think of nothing but Jasper's footsteps pacing backwards and forwards in his bedroom, which was above the dining-room. Long after every one had gone to bed she stood by her window, trying to gather courage to go and comfort Jasper. As a consciously plain woman she was deprecatory in action; as a sensitive woman she was tender to the reserves of others. She knew Jasper would be awake, going up and down like a caged creature. It was pathetic that he should feel so deeply a thing that seemed to her a trifle. That he should be homesick for a God and not able to find a God — this was tragic, terrible. But to-night the main point had been simply that he was expelled. On that everyone had harped. About that Jasper was defiant and wretched. Because of that he was tramping his room. She would go to him and tell him how greatly she admired him and sympathized with him. But no! The reserve that chained them all at Dormer and that often binds members of large families (so that the legends of chains rattling and fetters clanking in their haunted houses seem to have an allegorical significance) held her now a prisoner. Yet she could not sleep. The strange clashing of antagonistic tempera-

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ments, more obvious to-day than ever before; intuitive fear for Jasper, since she saw that his nerves were inadequate to the life before him — these things troubled her. She knew, because she loved him, that Jasper was one of those who need the woolly wrappings of convention — small, ordered thoughts, bounded desires, mediocre faiths, safe, communal rights. These would have kept his too sensitive spirit and easily frayed nerves warm and intact. She knew also that Jasper's tragedy lay in the fact that he could not have these safe things. His passionate love of truth sliced them away and left him shivering in the cold air of individual effort; committed him to wild adventures in quest of God, to insensate hopes and black despairs. Jaded by these Alpine wanderings, he was unfit to bear the strain of life at Dormer, and was, as he once said with bitterness, 'a very man's fool'.

Amber looked out into the chill moonlight. On the silver lawn the e lay, black and sharp as carved ebony, the shadow of the House of Dormer. Its two heavy, rounded gables of dark red brick topped with grey stone; the solid, massed chimneys and the weather-vane (a gilded trumpet supposed to be blown by the winds) were painted, large and far-spreading, on the grass. The house gave a sense of solidity even by its shadows. From outside came the muttering and crying of the weir and the Four Waters. Through this continual plaint broke, at times, the mutterings of the herds that peopled the low, misty meadows, their dim shapes moving portentously in the vague moonlight. Their inarticulate *malaise* with autumn or the night, with their unknown destiny or the quality of their herbage, burst forth at times into a smothered bellow, an incipient roar, broken and muffled as a tide on rocks. Sometimes one would startle the air with a high note that was almost a shriek; sometimes there would rise a deep, low chorus akin to the melody of milking-time. Never, for long together, was the round, hollow Dormer valley without some rumour of their calling, like the herds of humankind, out of their tentative darkness, for they knew not what. The mist, which lay lightly on the fields, thickened along the stream into an opaque curtain, standing about the domain of Dormer like the bands of an old enchantment. Mist always haunted Dormer. Sometimes the house stood knee-deep in it, like a cow in water; sometimes it was submerged far below, like a shell on the sea floor, the mist—white, weighty, stirless—brimming nearly to the tops of the surrounding hills. At these times, when the morning cocks crew sharp and sweet from the rickyard, the plaintive sadness of their thin music pricked Amber to tears. It was as if a city long dead, for infinite ages forgotten, were summoned from ancient oblivion by a resurrection trumpet so faint

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and inward-sounding that only the eager spirit heard, while the clay-bound sleepers never knew that the moon had slipped down behind the western hill and the grey world flushed for dawn.

Amber listened to the faint night-sounds that came and went beneath the singing of the water and the grumbling of the herds. There was the sea-murmur of the woods that climbed the hills and chanted in winter a song more mysterious, though of less volume, than that of summer. There was the lisp and rasp of dry leaves that came about the house on the doubtful night-wind. There was the sibilant whisper of large-leaved ivy that clothed the walls in heavy layers. And within the house, from their bedroom across the landing, Amber could hear the voices of her father and mother uplifted in their evening prayer. They always said their prayers aloud, perhaps for the sake of example, and their voices — lugubrious and penetrating — seemed to Amber to issue from their room like her father's setters from their kennel, dour, passionless, acquisitive. She felt shocked at herself for having had the idea, but with each rise in their inflexion the resemblance grew more distinct. At last they were still, and silence fell upon the house. Amber waited, hesitated, sought for some pretext for going to Jasper.

The time crept on to midnight. She opened her door, and straightway it seemed that the house was alive with noise, muted, but none the less noise. The echoing whisper of the clocks seemed very loud and full of meaning. The ticking of the one in the hall was like the falling of heavy drops of water. Then the grandfather clock hiccupped, and in a few minutes a storm of sound came up and along the passages. All the striking clocks gave out the hour, and from the kitchen — far down, as if from a cavern — the hoarse cuckoo shouted. Afterwards, in the comparative silence, as if in satiric jest, began a new ticking — the ticking of the death-watches. The old walls, hollowed and tunnelled by rats and mice, were so full of these little beetles that nobody took any notice of them except Sarah, who put cotton-wool in her ears nightly. But this was more than half in plain physical fear of earwigs, which she thought would penetrate to her brain. She had even been heard to say (in daylight) that 'death-watches were poor feckless things, traipsing and yammering like a blind beggar with a stick'. As Amber listened to these eerie tickings she was reminded of the sound of grandmother's watch at night, and of the curious ebony watch-stand on which it hung. She thought whimsically of all the death-watches ticking busily, each on a miniature stand, carved with an hour-glass and a skull.

As if at the signal of midnight, there now began a new sound, more

disturbing and grotesque than the noise of the death-watches — a human stir and murmur, probably started by the sound of the clocks. But the sounds were those of sleep, not of waking life. It was as if the spirits of those in the house, slumbering during the body's activity, half-awoke, and tried to pierce the silence around them. Amid a continual stir of restless movement, tossing and turning and creaking of beds, there began a low murmur from which at intervals a stray voice would emerge. Amber could hear Mrs. Darke talking, as she generally did in sleep, with a ceaseless monotony of self-expression. It was the reaction from her unnatural waking life. She who preserved all day an iron control of word and look and impulse committed herself all night. But even in unconsciousness she spoke with characteristic reserve, in a voice expressionless and secret. No one outside the room could ever have distinguished a word, and her husband, who might have heard, slept heavily and stertorously, his snores resounding through the walls. Amid Mrs. Darke's indistinct babble and Solomon's snores, Amber could hear Peter, whose door was ajar, grinding his teeth. This came at more or less regular intervals, and at other intervals, from the far end of the passage, came grandmother's voice, thin but awe-inspiring, crying 'Gideon!' and 'Jehovah!' Only from Catherine's room no sound ever came. Amber wondered what she herself contributed to this concert, and was smitten with silent, irrepressible laughter. But she became serious again when Ruby cried out in some dream terror. There was something wrong here, she felt, something sinister and unwholesome. Lost voices came along the tortuous passages, uplifted as if in complaint from amid murky dreams, and as if in baffled longing for some undiscovered good. Even so the nations sleeping, drugged by tradition, among the bones of their ancestors, stir restlessly and utter vague scattered cries, mutterings, a low lament, a sudden far shriek. The midnight house seemed like a graveyard where the tremendous 'I say unto thee, arise!' had been spoken and then revoked; where the dead stirred and uttered strange plaints and groanings, but could not cast aside their cerements nor rise up into the light of morning. Under the panic of the thought that they were like people in a vault, and that she and Jasper were the only ones alive, Amber fled along the passages to Jasper's room. She heard as she came near, with great reassurance, his restless tramping, comfortingly commonplace. Its very wrathfulness and irregularity brought relief. He seemed to her like the watchman in some ancient lightless town, where goblin hosts crush in from every side upon the shelving air, which strains and is fissured under the weight of evil until, to the terrified people in their nightmare chambers under the threatened roofs, comes the watch-

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man's voice, querulous with reality, telling them that the night is cold and rainy.

Amber, with her mouse-coloured hair and her face grey with weariness, looked, as she stood in the doorway, wrapped in her brown dressing-gown, like the priestess of some occult worship. Jasper did not see her. At the moment when she came in he was kneeling in front of a little table on which he had placed a photograph of Catherine with a vase of flowers in front of it. In the shock of this discovery, Amber's face at first expressed disgusted surprise, then, as she saw that he had, from very exhaustion, fallen into a doze on his knees, her look melted into pitiful love. At such times the intensity of her expression was so great that the outer self melted, like the crust of rock when fire breaks through, and was fused in the inner self. No matter what the face is, when the young spirit shines there exultant, it will be beautiful. For the spirit, the centre of the ego, is eternally vital, youthful, free. It has a thrilling life, never dreamed of by the earth-nourished body. So Amber's face in these rare moments was beautiful as are few faces in this world of pale emotions. For Amber Darke was something of a mystic, though not exactly a religious mystic, nor that wilder, sadder creature, an earth-mystic. Sometimes she was deeply stirred by the beauty of Nature, but she did not live for it alone, as does the true child of the weeping god. Sometimes it was music that stirred her, or a stray sentence from the Bible, or the stars, or poetry; but most often it was the sudden rapture or the sudden pain of loving. Love would leap up in her at a chance touch of pathos in the most unpromising people. At these times she left the shallows of beauty that is heard and seen, and slipped out into the deep sea where are no tides of change and decay, no sound, no colour, but only an essence. In those waters nothing is but the spirit. She alone knows the immortal waste. She only, in a voice lamenting and sweet, cries across it as the curlew cries in spring. She only, circling above its darkling peace, eyes its mystery that haply she may find God.

Amber stood and looked at Jasper for a moment, then softly went away. She was bitterly disappointed to find Catherine thus enshrined as a divinity, when she herself had only asked to be as a servant. It was grievous to see her perception and love refused and herself rejected for one whom, she could not help thinking, had little to give. But stronger than her disappointment was her need of doing something practical for Jasper. For the mystic, whatever received opinion may say, is always practical. He arrives at his ideas more quickly than others, reaching the centre while they grope in a circle. And to grasp the essential is to be

triumphantly practical. The world never credits the mystic with quick sight in mundane things, forgetting that, for his long gazing into infinity, better sight is necessary than for grasping obvious and clumsy facts. The mystic understands sex better than the sensualist. He can analyse malice, greed, hypocrisy, better than those who swim obscurely in their own black passions. A saint and not a devil can best unravel the psychology of evil.

Amber's heart said: 'Warmth and comfort!' She remembered that Jasper had probably had no food all day. With careful haste she went down the shallow, creaking stairs, followed by sighs, indistinct words, coughings desolate as the coughing of sheep on the wide moors, welcomed in the hall by the stern ticking of grandmother's clock and its growling, which was caused by some defect in its striking arrangements. In the kitchen the cuckoo defiantly announced the hour of one. This big, shadow-ridden place always filled Amber with panic at night. It was also so cavernous; the house seemed so haunted by broken voices. She hastened her preparations, hearing the autumn wind breathing beneath the door with the soft, long-drawn melancholy with which a horse sighs.

When she got back to Jasper, he was tramping up and down again, and the photograph was put away.

'Hullo! What d'you want?' he asked, in the unfriendly tone of those in stress of mind. But Amber knew that beneath the frown and the gruffness was a being who was very glad of sympathy. She saw his spirit like a little weeping boy, round-shouldered with vexation, backing into the darkest corner to avoid condolence, while watching with a concealedly eager eye for the following of love, for the outstretched hand and the carefully ordinary voice. She knew Jasper valued these things, for she had found by chance in his handkerchief drawer, carefully treasured, a letter she had once slipped under his door when he was in durance after falling foul of grandmother. She had comforted him then, so she could comfort him now; for whose nerves are more sensitive in trouble, who is more unreachable than a boy? She made a cheerful wood fire, put the kettle on and spread the little meal on two chairs. Jasper, interested in spite of himself, walked about in a moodiness that showed signs of disappearing when the ingratiating scents of tea and frizzled bacon filled the room.

'Now, dear!' announced Amber, conscious of recklessness, for in the atmosphere of Dormer endearments seemed out of place.

Warmed and comforted, Jasper spoke. Amber waited, breathless, for the long-desired talk about the events at college from Jasper's point of view, for a word of illumination as to his own ideas; for — possibly — a touch of affection for herself. She loved both boys; but Jasper she idolized.



NORMAN WEALE M.DCCCXLI.

NIGHT IN DORMER

'Don't you think,' said he, 'that Cathy's an angel?'

That Amber did not burst into tears argued a certain strength of character in her. That she lied cheerfully, heartily, and immediately, proclaimed her a great lover. For if there was a person on earth that Amber mistrusted, saw through and feared, it was Catherine Velindre.

'So noble and above common things' went on the adorer, chumbling bacon with wholesome relish.

Amber clenched her hands.

'Anyway, he likes his supper,' she told herself. 'You are very fond of Catherine, I know,' she said aloud.

The room was comfortably reassuring, Amber receptive, but no inquisitive (curiosity is a weed-killer to young confidence). The barrier came down.

'Fond, Ambie! Fond! I'd die a thousand deaths for her. I'm not good enough even to be her friend, and yet - ' his voice went from him in an undignified husk, for it is only in grand opera and in bird-land that the lover's inmost heart is spoken with unwavering tunefulness. In the daily life of man huskiness hovers round the gates of expression with humiliating insistence, and the helpful lozenge is not always handy.

'Jam?' queried Amber practically. 'You like strawberry.'

Jam acting as a demulcent, Jasper took up his tale.

'I wish we were back in the old days, and I could gallop away with her colours on my helmet and tilt with everybody in her honour!'

His face was exalted, flushed with the embarrassment of self-expression, his dark hair ruffled. He looked younger than ever, and he always looked too young for his years. The idealist, if the world lets him alone, keeps his childhood until he dies. He only loses it if some great emotional tempest ravages his being to the depths. Amber thought: 'He looks like a dear fluffy chicken!' She said: 'I'm glad you can't. You'd get so knocked about. They always did.'

'I want to do hard things for her.'

'It seems to me that you have something quite hard enough to do — living here at Dormer with Peter put above you, and not quarrelling with him or with Ernest. Not giving in and yet not arguing, nor irritating them all.'

'O Lord! What a life!'

'If I were you, I should go out into the world.'

'If *she* came too!' His beautiful eyes had such a look of rhapsody and blazing passion that Amber, flushing, turned away. The old slumbering longings, the old unconquerable desires flamed up within her anew. No!

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She would never have a lover. Catherine, with her beauty; Ruby, with her abundant health — lovers were for them. But who would ever seek in Amber Darke, so still, of so sad-coloured an exterior, the creature of fire and tears that could feed a man's heart with faery food and call him into Paradise with songs wild as those of hawks on the untrodden snow-fields?

'Of course,' said Jasper, 'you don't know how a chap feels. But to me it would be heaven just to pile up everything I had in front of her — if I had anything worth giving.'

'She'd take it,' said Amber.

'And hell would be — her misunderstanding me.'

'You think she understands you now?'

'Oh yes! She doesn't approve, but she understands. She's got such a lot of sympathy.'

'H'm!'

'As long as she believes in my motives, everybody else can go hang.'

'I believe in you, Jasper.'

'Do you?' His tone was grateful, but indifferent.

Amber sighed audibly.

'Would Catherine, now that they all think you so wicked, marry you?'

'Marry me? Marry me!' Jasper tasted the delicious, commonplace phrase as if it were new honey. 'Marry me?'

All the flutes of the morning were playing fantasias in his head. How soft and persuasive they were! How sweet and maddening! They were like the birds in Dormer forest when the April madness had them under its spell. And Amber, commonplace, sisterly, dull, Amber had started them. He looked at her ruminatively. He had never, until now, thought of Catherine as his wife. He had dwelt upon her with the selfless imagination of a poet's first love. Amber's stray words had altered his whole point of view, as stray words will. Catherine Velindre would never again find the completely malleable metal with which she had been accustomed to deal. A hardening alloy had been introduced, and Catherine's clever fingers would find their work no longer easy. Despondency fell again on Jasper.

'No,' he said. 'I don't believe she ever would.'

He was once more wrapped in reserve; the flutes had made him shy, aloof. What should Amber know of them? What could she know of the music of passion? The cries of the Venusberg, so shrill and fierce, were not for sister's ears.

'And you wouldn't change your views, Jasper? Not even for her?'

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Jasper's chin came out. Immediately it seemed to Amber that her mother had impinged on their talk.

'No! Not even for her!' said Jasper. His face took on a sombre and forbidding look — a look that boded ill for his happiness. Then his eyes brightened.

'But she wouldn't ask it. She's too large-minded. Although she's very religious, she'll understand that my way is right for me. She'll be tolerant.'

'Like Ernest!' Amber said it with a smile.

'Tolerant, great-aunt, tolerant!' quoted Jasper. His mimicry of Ernest was so inimitable the Amber had to stifle her laughter in the pillow. She had a rare capacity for mirth. Her aspect of controlled gleefulness was continually apt, without notice, to break out into laughter as violent as that of Isoud of fragrant memory, who, as the naïve chronicle remarks, 'laughed till she fell down'. This whole-hearted laughter and the irresistible humour behind it had stood her in good stead at Dormer. She had been known, in moments of grave family crisis, when the atmosphere was heavy and electric, and all minds were sternly exercised over a delinquent, to collapse into helpless and infectious laughter. Grandmother would speak of 'the crackling of thorns', and Mrs. Darke would say, in her green-ice tone, 'I hate a laugh!' Catherine would merely look pained.

'You know Ernest's coming next week?' asked Amber.

Jasper nodded glumly.

'And I think, I'm afraid, he wants to marry Ruby.'

'Great Heavens! Can't it be stopped?' Jasper spoke with such real disgust, as if at something unnatural and indecent, that Amber was again overwhelmed in laughter. But her eyes grew mournful when she thought of Ruby.

'I'm afraid not,' she said. 'You see, they all want it, and Ruby's such a child. She thinks of things like rings and dresses.'

'Don't you?' Jasper was momentarily curious about his elder sister.

'Oh, no.'

'Would Cathy?'

'No. She's above *that*.'

What Cathy was not above remained unspoken; for at that moment the cocks began to crow down in the misty morning fields, and within the house the passing of time became audible; for the clocks struck in every room, and it was as if Time's robe had rustled.

'I must go,' said Amber. 'Sarah will be down soon.'

When she had taken back the supper tray and regained her own room, she looked at her face in the mirror. It gazed back at her, twenty years

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older for the night of watching. For perceptiveness and emotional beauty, even the gift of humour, must be paid for to the last drop of vitality. Hence the poet very often dies in early youth, the lover of humanity is smitten by disease, those who would be the Christs of the world have 'faces marred more than any man's'.

'Ah, well! what does it matter?' she thought. 'Nobody notices what I look like.'

Yet the irony of the fact that, in growing nearer to the spiritual ideal hinted by her own face in childhood, she had lost the physical expression of it, was bitter. The spirit, after all its wild burning, had left her face not gaunt and riven (she would not have minded that) but commonplace. Her eyes should have been, according to poetic justice, clear pools for God and His tremulous retinue of shadowy woes and glimmering joys to lean across and watch their delicate reflections. But they were dull and sad. This is often so with minds of peculiar strength or tenderness. The world lays such heavy burdens on them that something must break. The soul is impregnable, so the body breaks. The people whose eyes are clear pools are usually those who, being completely vacant in soul, put all their vitality into physical well-being and have a good digestion.

She leant from her window into the twisted, ancient pear tree that grew round it, watching the yellow leaves floating, hesitant, to the wet, brown soil; hearing the late pears, left ungathered a day too long, falling with faint thuds, as their stalks, severed by damp and the slight frost, gave way one by one.

'I must tell Enoch,' she thought, For out-of-doors Enoch was the providence of the family, as Sarah was within. Amber lay down, but she could not sleep, seeing ahead of Jasper the rocks he could not see, the inevitable conflict that must arise when two entities wish to go linked through life, but are attracted to opposite paths.

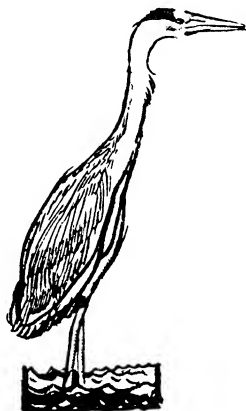
'I wish I didn't know Catherine quite so well,' thought Amber. 'Perhaps I misjudge her.'

But cold, smooth as a well-cut mirror, changeless as fate, Catherine's personality floated up before her. She heard the clash of wills, the baying of the pack of bitter thoughts, warped loves, disillusionments, despairs. The scene was laid for tragedy — not necessarily overt tragedy, but a drama of the spirit, more devastating, more searing. How was she, with her small strength, to avert it?

She heard Sarah wrestling with the bolts and shutters, and knew that the day had begun. From the pear tree came the courageous shrilling of a

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robin who, having breakfasted with alderman's pomp on half a pear, intended to give his audience something handsome in the way of music. And from Dormer Woods away across the water an autumn thrush fluted pensively, like a voice calling from another world, the song of one of the elder gods out of the dædal forest.





CHAPTER FIVE

FAMILY PRAYERS

AMBER was late for prayers. These were an institution at Dormer. It seemed to Amber that every one was unwillingly obliged, for fear of every one else's displeasure, to take part in them. Even Enoch's cousin, Marigold, was under orders from Mrs. Darke to attend and be saved, because she worked daily at Dormer. His aunt, Mrs. Gosling, however, who only put in a few hours' work each week, might presumably absent herself and be damned. Enoch Gale himself, in spite of all representations, steadfastly refused to hear the Word. He was put down as 'simple' by every one but Sarah, who would say to him on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday: 'Well, we've bin through a long sitting to-day. Nigh on half an hour. There's more sense at the back of them calf's eyes of yours than a body 'ud think, Enoch!'

She hoped that these veiled compliments would lure Enoch to commit himself as to his reason for avoiding prayers. Mrs. Velindre said it was secret sin, but Sarah scouted this, saying: 'He inna 'cute enough to sin.' Enoch never committed himself, being, facially and vocally, as immune from self-expression as a young owl. It was quite useless for Mrs. Darke to send for him, and say: 'You are expected to attend prayers, Gale,' or for grandmother to add: 'Watch and pray, Gale!' When Solomon said:

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'D'you hear the missus, Enoch?' he replied, 'Ah, sir, I yeard the missus,' But next day, as usual, he failed to watch and pray.

This morning Jasper was also absent, and there was more nervous tension than usual as the family watched Amber's flurried entrance.

Sarah and Marigold sat apart like lepers on the other side of a stretch of neutral-tinted carpet. Solomon read the Bible in the gruff, protesting voice of a man of action confronted by literature. Every day he gave them a chapter, and said the same number of prayers. But he was not the kind of man to make such gatherings seem a mystic meeting of all the wistful souls in the House of Life. There are some beautiful and benignant personalities that can do this, glorifying even a function which has been spoilt by respectability. They can infuse into the forms of Christianity so grave and sweet a loveliness, as to allure the mind — even a mind that knows them to be weaving dreams on the loom of legend, preaching the Godhead of Christ as the old alchemists preached the elixir of life.

On Sundays Solomon went once to church. Once a month he attended 'the second service'. On ordinary occasions he put a shilling in the offertory; at Christmas, half a crown; at Harvest Thanksgiving, gold. He was considered a good Churchman, and a good business man. He had been a land agent, but had retired on his father's death to the ancestral house of Dormer. Perhaps the most lovable thing about him was his honest indifference towards every member of his household except his two setters.

'Praise Him in His name Jah!' read Solomon, unconsciously hurrying and blurring the words a little, as the suave scent of hot bacon stole in from the kitchen. Sarah was the only person who showed any interest in the remark, and she spelt the divine cognomen with an 'r'. Amber observed that Ruby was asleep, that her mother was busily tearing an envelope into small pieces, that Sarah was chumbling coffee berries, to which she was partial, and that Peter was staring at the isolated Marigold with extraordinary fixity. Marigold's cheeks, always of a bright cherry laid very definitely on the cream, were much pinker than usual, and her whole body drooped. Her eyes had a curious expression for which Amber could find no name. Peter looked older than his years. His rather hawk-like and fierce face had lost its round boyishness, and his quick, imperious dark eyes were those of the born adventurer. Brought up in an atmosphere of things outworn, sent to a school where the same atmosphere brooded, he could find no outlet. He was possessed of the same passion as his mother for impressing his personality on something or somebody, only his mind was not yet warped. But no one had ever told him of the

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great adventures of the soul; of the trackless paths of imagination; of philosophy and its brave search for truth; of love and its golden abnegations, its supreme rewards. Peter would have made a martyr for any cause that had enough life in it. He was full of the defiant 'I will', which in unity with 'I love', moves mountains. But his temperament, his abilities and budding promise, had not been discovered or treasured, so he lounged about at home, full of urgent, aimless vitality, and spent the moments of enforced stillness at prayers in staring Marigold out of countenance. This morning Amber noticed that while Peter stared at Marigold, Catherine was watching Peter, intent, yet guarded, with an occasional glance to spare for Marigold, who seemed almost to writhe under Catherine's aloof, cold, virginal glance, strongly tinctured with criticism. Once Peter caught Catherine's eye and scowled; but she met the scowl with a half smile.

'Let us pray!' said Solomon, and they all went down, with more or less grace, on to their knees.

When the others knelt, grandmother remained seated, like a stone idol which is immune, through its very stoniness, from human movement. It was understood that grandmother could not kneel. Only grandmother and her Creator knew that not her knees but her pride of years deterred her from this religious exercise; that, in fact, she did not choose to kneel. This remaining upright amidst a grovelling family gave her a satiric glee. Her gaze, travelling over the kneeling figures, seemed to say: 'Don't you wish you were older?' She triumphed in the fact that her daughter — even she, the cold, the dreaded — humbly knelt, while, by an unsuspected artifice, she herself escaped. She enjoyed her leisurely scrutiny of shoulders and backs of heads, noticing with secret amusement that Ruby's blouse was undone, Amber's hair untidy, Rachel's quite white over the ears. She perceived also that Sarah sat on her heels instead of kneeling (she often spoke to Sarah about this, but without effect), and that Peter was making 'mice' with his handkerchief, to the delight of Marigold.

Serene above the array of backs, Mrs. Velindre was also able, in her leisurely privacy, to have an occasional game of *solitaire*, for which she had a passion. She made this right in her own eyes by telling herself that she was simply passing the marbles through her fingers as nuns handle their beads, only without the wickedness of Rome. The lugubriousness of some of grandmother's *Amens* was not due, as Amber once pityingly thought, to a sense of the tragedy of age, nor, as Sarah thought, to indigestion. It was due to the game going badly. Amber knew the truth now, for since grandmother had decided to sit next the lamp (for the better

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management of the marbles), her shadow had utterly betrayed her to the two girls sitting near her, and had gone grotesquely mopping and mowing — coal-black on the dun carpet — like a long-armed imp, first to the feet of Amber, and then to the feet of Catherine, while the marbles made themselves elongated shadows, like little pillars. Amber never divulged this, though she longed to share with Jasper a joke that made her crinkle with laughter night after night. Catherine's silence had a different motive. She regarded such chance bits of knowledge as so many trump cards to be kept for moments of need. She was not at all amused, but slightly irritated, that grandmother should consider her foolish ruse successful.

Amber wondered, as her father went through the usual prayers, in the usual way, what they were all there for. When they all joined in a prayer, their voices seemed to her so discordant — tuned by duty and not by love, each going loudly on its own way — that she was reminded of a dog shouting. She was sorry for a God who was compelled, every day at eight, to hear this, infinitely multiplied, when He might have been listening to trees or running water, or the song of birds created for joy.

'Amen!' said Solomon, with a note of triumph, and in a moment, as by a conjuring trick, all except Sarah and Marigold were in their chairs, eating.

Mrs. Darke poured out coffee as remorselessly as if it were poison. Perhaps she was bored with the multitude of cups, but she never accepted help.

'What about Jasper?' she asked, when the cups had gone round.

Jasper looked nervous. He hated these family discussions that always came at meals. He had manoeuvred to sit by Catherine. This was Amber's 'place'. Everybody at Dormer had a 'place', and it was sin to take it. Amber however, said nothing, but sat down by grandmother. This position no one coveted, as grandmother emphasized her wishes by a very sharp elbow in the side of her neighbour.

'Well?' said Mrs. Darke sharply.

Solomon looked at his eldest son ruefully.

'I dunno,' he said.

'What's he to do?' asked his wife.

'I don't see that he can have the place now. I can't take it off Peter.'

'From, Solomon!' Mrs. Darke spoke with exasperation.

'From!' echoed grandmother, in a cautionary tone, addressing the lumps of sugar that she was drowning in her cup. When she did this, her parchment face had an expression that might have been worn by a mediæval lady drowning another lady in the moat.

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'Seeing that Peter's gone straight, and Jasper's gone crooked,' added Solomon. Jasper, looking at Peter's self-righteous expression, wanted to spring at him. The two young men, with their straight, rather Egyptian profiles, glared at each other across Catherine's head, gracefully bent. They always seemed to be one on either side of Catherine. This morning the three of them made a striking frieze, like one on an ancient vase, Catherine managing to look like gracious femininity between two types of predatory manhood.

'But Jasper will go into the Church,' she said softly. 'He won't disappoint us all.'

'He can't if they turn him out of college,' said Peter, with a loud laugh.

'He can go to another college,' murmured Catherine. 'He can retrieve his mistake.'

'Retrieve! Ha! Good girl!' said Solomon, feeling at home with the word.

'I wish you'd talk to me and not at me,' remarked Jasper.

'Why not go for the Army?' asked Solomon.

'Fight the good fight,' added Mrs. Velindre.

'Die for your country!' Peter put in.

'Not die, Jasper!' cried Ruby, with great concern. 'No, you must live and get very fat, like the old sergeant at the Keep, and wear a medal, and remember battles a hundred years ago.'

Mrs. Darke looked as if she thought dying for some respectable object was the only thing left for Jasper to do.

'Well, my lad,' suggested Solomon, 'suppose we buy you a commission?'

Catherine silently turned her eyes on Jasper, and his pale, regular face suddenly reddened, like a statue in a stormy sunrise.

'I'd rather stay at Dormer, Father,' he said.

'He's afraid!' shouted Peter, and received, above Catherine's head, what Sarah would have called a clout.

In a moment Peter was on his feet, his chair upset with the violence of his rising.

Sarah, who came in at that moment to 'gather for washing-up' afterwards remarked to Marigold:

'The young gentlemen's ravening sore; like two furious cats they be. I never saw the like!'

'I'se reckon Master Peter'll be king o' the midden if it comes to fisses,' remarked Marigold.

'Wringing clothes gives you a very red face, Marigol' — a very red face it does. Maybe, it's your 'cart!' Sarah spoke with fine irony.

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In the dining-room the storm had been quelled by Solomon's command, and the conversation continued in a highly electric atmosphere.

'If he stays, he'd better work at Arkinstall's,' said Mrs. Darke.

'What for?' asked Solomon. 'I can't set him up as a farmer.'

'To earn his keep,' said his mother.

'In the sweat of his brow,' added grandmother. She felt that this work, which Jasper was known to detest, would be a fitting judgment from the Lord.

'But I don't want to be a farm labourer!' Jasper was dismayed.

'No. The lad must have a respectable trade,' said Solomon, who had some rudimentary ideas of fairness. 'You'd better be a land agent, boy.'

'But I've no gift for such things, Father. Can't I go on with my books?'

'If you go into the Church.'

'Never!'

'Jasper!' Catherine's voice was caressing. 'Jasper! Think how much good you could do.'

'It's useless to argue, Cathy.'

'She's a sensible girl,' remarked Solomon.

'I thought,' Jasper spoke hesitatingly, 'I could get a job at the Keep, and bicycle there every day.'

'I can't bethwarted!' grandmother suddenly broke out. She had a theory that, if crossed, she would die. She was fond of saying: 'I've got a weak heart, Rachel!' — dropping her 'h' not because she could not aspirate it, but because she did not see why, at her age, any letter of the alphabet should be her master. She said it now, adding: 'In the sweat of his brow. It is the judgment of the Lord.'

'But can you stand such hard manual work, Jasper?' asked Amber.

'He looks remarkably well,' said Mrs. Darke. She had said the same at the death-bed of each of her early wilting sisters, for she was that curio which one meets very frequently — a stoic to the pain of others.

'Take it or leave it,' said Solomon, getting up. 'Board and lodging and training at Arkinstall's, or — get out.'

Jasper opened his mouth to say he would get out. But Catherine, with a slanting look shot with green fire, chill as ice, caught his glance in a cold spell, as the sirens caught the ships of lost mariners. Stranded and fascinated, he felt as the weaker does in the presence of the strong, that there was only one thing to do. Catherine's thin lips slid into a smile that made a dimple in her right cheek; her hair had a living and conquering ripple, with a sheen like copper-coloured armour.

'I never could have believed,' thought Jasper to himself, his eyes

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dwelling on her face, 'that anything could be so white and so warm at once — except a rose, a hedge-top rose, out of my reach.'

Then, realizing that Peter was in ecstasies of laughter, pointing at them with a shaking finger, he forcibly withdrew his eyes, and said simply:

'Arkinstall's, then, so be it.'

'Amen,' said grandmother.



CHAPTER SIX

THE ADVENT OF ERNEST

ERNEST was arriving. He was bicycling from Mallard's Keep — the scene of his recent ministrations. It was twelve miles away, but, as Ernest said, he was 'vigorous, vigorous!' He believed very strongly in athletics of all kinds, and one of his mottoes was: '*Mens sana in corpore sano.*' Whatever he achieved with regard to *mens*, *corpus* was a triumphant success. Some of the family waited in the hall to welcome him. The hall was large and dusky, with a stone staircase. The walls were adorned with horns, hoofs, heads, tails, feet, fur, and occasionally with complete corpses of wild creatures. It was a savage spectacle and when the house had been shut at night it smelt as atrocious as the most indignant ghost of a hunted animal could desire in the way of vengeance. These trophies and various guns and whips made, with a large dinner bell, the furniture of the hall. Brown druggot ran from door to door, that leading to the drawing-room little trodden, that leading from kitchen to dining-room worn white by Sarah's emphatic feet.

Amber, seeing the group, felt indignant when she remembered Jasper's home-coming. Punctually almost to a moment, Ernest came pedalling up the drive. As he entered, he said: 'Peace be to this house,' and raised his right hand. He was tall and stout. 'A mountain of a man,' according to Sarah. He was florid in complexion.

'Yes! His eyes are crafty,' thought Amber, peering over the banisters. His hair was very fair, and his head dome-shaped. The sparseness and paleness of his hair helped on the oviform effect. Peter and Jasper had been

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known, in their youth, to rush kitchenwards at Ernest's arrival, shouting, 'An egg-cup!' This joke was greatly appreciated by Sarah, who always flung her apron over her head, placed one hand on her heart and one on her diaphragm, and rocked in an agony of laughter.

Ernest rather waived the clerical in his dress. It was a discreet blend of the ecclesiastical and the sporting. On the expanse of his waistcoat shone a Maltese cross, inscribed with the cryptic remark: 'All in One.' Why he wore this, what it meant, who first thought of it, were mysteries. Probably the phrase pleased him because of its crowdedness. He was, as he often said, 'Gregarious, friend, gregarious!'

Hardly had the first greetings been interchanged, when grandmother's penetrating voice was uplifted.

'Great-nephew! I hear you!'

As a matter of fact, Ernest was so distantly related to the family as hardly to be connected, but they believed in the ties of blood, and grandmother liked to be called 'great-aunt'. They all repaired to the dining-room.

'You're not so deaf as you sometimes seem, Grandmamma,' said Catharine.

'Heh?'

'You're not deaf, Mamma!' said Mrs. Darke coldly. 'At least, you're only deaf when you wish it.'

'The wind bloweth where it listeth!' quoted Mrs. Velindre airily. She had a gift for apparently pointless quotations which, by their very inappositeness, quelled her adversary, and were usually found, on examination, to have a sardonic fitness.

'Great-aunt Velindre! Young as ever! Wonderful! Wonderful!' cried Ernest.

'Too old to kneel,' said grandmother, with what Sarah called her 'downy' glance.

'When the heart adores,' said Ernest mellifluously, 'the feeble knee is pardoned.'

Grandmother looked pleased. 'D'you know,' she confided in her sounding whisper, 'Jasper's been a naughty boy. A very naughty boy! He's an infidel!'

She said it in the tone of concealed glee with which one child will sometimes speak of another's misdemeanours.

'Ah, yes. Pity! Pity!' Ernest replied. 'Give him line!'

He was rather a predatory shepherd. He always spoke of 'catching them young', 'hauling them in', 'spreading the net wide'.

'It's a sign of the times,' said grandmother.

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'What is, Granny?' asked Amber.

'Unbelief. The end is upon us. Day of wrath! At midnight, or at cock-crowing, or in the morning.' This sentence of grandmother's had, in Amber's childhood, kept her awake night after night, afraid to go for comfort to her father, lest he should endorse grandmother's words. When sheet-lightning played across the velvet night, she would be paralysed with terror, momentarily expecting the rending blast of the trumpet. When shooting stars wandered to annihilation across her little window, she covered her head with the pillow and waited tensely, as one always awaits an expected sound, for the terrible stir of resurrection. Terrible indeed it all seemed to her, coming as it did, wrapped in the grave-clothes of grandmother's creed. Her sanity might have been threatened, but for Sarah's coming into her room one night, to find her hysterical with fear.

's Amber, 'ush your roaring,' she said decidedly, when she had heard the story. 'Would 'im above finish up the 'orld with all the harvest about so untidy, and the turkeys but half grown? Not likely! When He finishes, it'll be done proper. And I ask you, 's Amber, what time o' the year there *inna* summat in the doing? Come to think on it, I don't see when the 'orld *could* end, for even in January there's the ewes near lambing, and the early rhubarb coming on and what not.'

This peculiar theology had greatly comforted Amber.

'Great-aunt,' said Ernest, 'he *must* find God! He *shall* find God!' He had just added: 'Persuasion! Persuasion!' when Jasper came into the room, not looking very open to suasion.

'A little talk, a quiet little talk, Jasper!' said Ernest. 'That's what we need; that's what we must have!'

To do him justice, he meant to help, and tried to be tolerant. But his bedside manner was too much for Jasper.

'A friendly talk?' he concluded. 'You'd like that?'

'Enormously! Enormously!' replied Jasper.

Amber gave an irrepressible little gurgle, which might have passed unnoticed but for Mrs. Velindre, who pointed an accusing finger at Amber.

'Risible!' she said. 'Always was! Laughed at her baptism. Blessed are they that weep!'

At this point Sarah rang the tea-bell. She always seemed to enjoy these moments, four times a day, when, instead of listening in silence as she handed dishes, she was able, *ex officio*, to drown the voices of the family in torrents of noise.

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Solomon and Peter came in.

'They've spared you from the Keep, then,' was Solomon's greeting.

'Yes, my Vicar was kind, very kind. Let me come without a murmur.'

'Willingly — willingly!' muttered Jasper.

Grandmother, who had been watching Solomon carve the game pie, fortunately created a diversion at this point by calling out in a tone of anguish:

'I like the tid-bits! Give *me* the tid-bits! I'm so old!'

'Well, you see, ma'am,' — Solomon always spoke respectfully to Mrs. Velindre. She filled him with an almost religious awe — 'You see, Ernest's the guest.'

'But he don't *need* the tid-bits,' said grandmother argumentatively. 'He's as fat as butter already. Now *I'm* thin!'

She was indeed cadaverous and meagre.

Amber, with difficulty controlling her laughter, looked to see how Ernest received this. But he was talking to Ruby and had not heard.

He was saying in his usual cumulative style:

'Cousin Ruby, pink is your colour. You should always wear pink. You *must* always wear pink!'

Ruby was looking flushed and pretty. Colour was her one claim to beauty, and the pale, chiselled face of Catherine looked scorn at her on this account.

'Last piece,' said Peter, pushing the bread-and-butter plate towards Ruby, 'last piece and a handsome husband.'

Ernest blushed.

Ruby was pleasantly aware that he admired her. To her eighteen years, this was sweet. She began to dream of wedding cake and dresses; to imagine how the three church bells would ring — *Ting Tang Tong! Ting Tang Tong!* She could see the lines of villagers (very sparse lines, for the parish was small) watching her triumphant progress to the carriage. Amber and Catherine would be her bridesmaids (Catherine would not like her being married first), and they would help her to dress. Then her father would say something funny, and the Rector something solemn, and her mother — (No. On second thoughts, it was quite impossible to imagine her mother crying.) Then they would drive away, and she would have 'done well for herself'. She would be a success according to Dormer ideas. It did not occur to her that this conception of marriage was like an elaborate box with nothing in it.

She decided that Ernest's forehead was intellectual; that the egg-cup joke was unjust. She giggled so much at everything Ernest said — and he

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said a good deal — that Mrs. Darke frowned ominously. Then, being an astute woman, she considered the matter and frowned no more.

Ernest was patronizingly absorbed, and his cold eyes rested on Ruby. Amber, from her unnoticed corner, saw in them an expression only to be described as greed. She could not help thinking of a toad travelling over a strawberry bed. If Ernest had known her thoughts, perhaps he would have modified his summing-up of her personality, which was: 'Colourless, great-aunt, colourless!' It was a trick of his to sum-up people in this way. Having done so, nothing but a portent would shake his belief in his own decree. Amber felt more and more that, in spite of his good nature, she did not like Ernest. Her eyes wandered to Jasper, sunk in gloom because Catherine was talking to Peter. She wondered why none of them was happy at Dormer. It occurred to her that they were apt to treat one another as society treats the poor — as criminals. Especially was this so if the inner self of any member of the family dared to peer out of its hiding — dared to show what it was, instead of remaining concealed in what they all thought it was. It was seldom attempted, for there are few things so strong as mass-atmosphere. Half a dozen people can build about a soul walls stronger than those that were built around erring nuns; in that prison the living is as helpless as if he were dead. Let these people decide that a sane man is mad (he being different from them) and his most reasonable actions will be twisted to madness. If he is sensitive, he will probably be driven mad in the end, from a consciousness of injustice, antipathy, and the hopelessness of all his struggles for understanding. So at Dormer Amber was colourless, Jasper had a secret sin, Ruby needed moulding, and Enoch was 'simple'.

Amber's further reflections were cut short by the ringing of the front-door bell, and by the appearance of Sarah, who remarked in her usual stony manner:

'The Rectory!'

To Sarah, the man without his house was a poor, flaccid thing, like a snail without its shell. She, therefore, made a practice of announcing houses and not people. To such as Sarah, bricks and mortar mean a great deal, the mind very little. So in the village it was never 'Mr. Darke's lugging the hay', or 'Arkinstall's cutting'; it was 'Dormer's lugging', and 'The Wallows is cutting'.

'I've put 'em in the drawing-room,' Sarah remarked.

'Light the fire,' said Mrs. Darke.

'Done!' replied Sarah, who loved to be able to meet a command in this way. It was one of her few satisfactions in a life of drudgery performed



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for people to most of whom she was indifferent, while some she actively disliked, and one — her mistress — she hated.

A crowd of people shut up together in one house, one creed, one strait view of life, must eventually wear one another out. Good nature is ground down by constant friction. Hatred leaps out like sparks from flint and iron. Society thinks that mistakes are made and crimes committed through the human soul being too much itself, going its own way. But crimes really happen through the soul being too little itself, striving to conform, or being crushed into conformity.

The family adjourned to the drawing-room, where the Rector stood, hands behind him, examining the one picture in the room (excepting portraits) with the critical, astute air of one at an art exhibition — the same look with which he had regarded the same picture on every visit to Decker in the last twenty years.

Mrs. Cantlop sat by the fire. Her hair, snow-white and always untidy, was crowned by a lace cap adorned with a tremendous ultramarine bow. These bows of Mrs. Cantlop's desolated Mrs. Velindre, for she could not wear such things herself. She had once, in emulation, donned a large velvet bow; but her daughter had heaped such bitter scorn upon it, that the poor old lady had given up the attempt, almost in tears. Tears were difficult to connect with grandmother Velindre; one expected them to be less like rain than hail. Since that day, grandmother's small, round, hard head was always decked with the unambitious caps that suited her best. She confided to Amber how much she felt this, and how greatly she resented the fact that Mrs. Cantlop (a younger woman, a much less important woman) could outshine her in capwear. Not that Mrs. Cantlop did exactly *wear* her caps. They seemed rather to have alighted unexpectedly, like birds in a high wind, on her hair, and they were always on one side. About all her clothes there was this air of separate volition, as if she were perpetually saying to them, in the words of her favourite hymn, 'Thy will, not mine, be done.'

Mrs. Cantlop was engaged in tatting — a curious and ancient occupation, which seemed to have for her a peculiar fascination. Every blind at the Rectory was edged with it; the legs of the arm-chairs were decently veiled with it; cushions bristled with it; her own room might fairly be said to reek of it; and things had come to such a pass that the Rector had to lock up his dressing-gown.

'Well, Rector!' said Ernest, entering boisterously, 'I've come!'

'Yes,' replied the Rector depressedly. He did not like Ernest very much, and he had been more or less forced, by Mrs. Darke's representations,

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Ernest's bland bullying and his own good nature, to give him the curacy. Pulling himself together, he endeavoured to infuse into his manner an air of delight, for he was a kindly man.

'Welcome to our little community, Swyndle,' he said cordially. 'I look forward to hearing you read many a good sermon in our ancient pulpit.'

'Extempore! Extempore!' Ernest corrected.

'As you please, of course.'

The Rector himself managed to preach excellent sermons, and to keep people awake, through being a first-rate raconteur. By virtue of this gift he could make the most insipid, dull or coarse narrative seem cultured and interesting, with a gentle aroma of the walnuts and the wine.

'I should like,' said Mrs. Cantlop in her crooning voice (it was always a croon except when, under the visitation of heaven, it was a wail), 'to add my mite of welcome, Mr. Swyndle. And so, if he were here, would Keturah's father.' Here Mrs. Cantlop's voice faltered, and grandmother eyed her with contemptuous interest.

The gentleman alluded to was Mr. Cantlop. He was not, as might be supposed, defunct. He was, to use his wife's words, 'looking for gold in the wickedest place in the world'. He had been thus engaged for the past thirty years, but so far there was no indication of his having found any. In their early married life he had set up as a tea merchant at Dormer. He and his Maker alone knew why he thought he could get a living in this way. He did not make a living. Solomon's father, a very arbitrary old gentleman, rated him soundly and told him if he couldn't make gold he'd better 'go and scrat for it'. As Mr. Cantlop afterwards told his wife, 'Incompetence was mentioned, and the name of California.' It was useless for Mr. Cantlop to say he did not want gold, or for Mrs. Cantlop to say she wanted Mr. Cantlop. Public opinion was too strong for them. They tried to be cheerful.

'My dear,' said Mr. Cantlop, 'I'll seek it. I'll find it. I'll bring it.' He had a gift for terse and energetic expression; but there it usually stopped. Under the stern eye of Solomon's father the poor little man did really set out with a carpet bag and a red pocket-handkerchief and eyes even redder from the parting with Amelia, and a ticket provided by the Rector. Mystery had flung her curtains over his doings after this, though from his yearly letters it was known that he had arrived in California. In these letters he always spoke of the gold as being just at hand. Mrs. Cantlop nearly always alluded to him as 'Keturah's father', seeming to feel that his personality, taken alone, was rather misty. Keturah had ceased to exist a

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few hours after she began her earthly race (during the tea period) so her personality was, at best, doubtful. But taken together, rolled into a ball and shaped by her imagination, they became quite intimidating and attained a kind of ghostly awfulness, a spook-like majesty. With them — or, rather, with it, for Mrs. Cantlop had made out of two nonentities an entity — the timid old lady was even able to enter the lists with grandmother. That lady held her in unutterable scorn, because she was 'nesh', and because she was not a grandmother. To Mrs. Velindre her own life seemed eminently right and laudable. She was a mother and a grandmother. It did not occur to her to wonder, before engaging in these occupations, whether she was fitted for them. Nor would she ever have thought, as she looked at her daughter's face — chill, secret and expressionless as granite — that perhaps she was a greater failure than Mrs. Cantlop.

The two old heads nodded at each other across the large, chilly room. They were like generals in a battlefield many times contested. The Dormer drawing-room was, in some curious way, reminiscent of a mausoleum. The vault-like air; the white marble mantelpiece recalling tombs; the wreath of wax camelias made by Mrs. Velindre in early youth and by her jealously treasured; the heavy curtains of purple cloth and the immense valance, weighted with balls and fringe, that concealed their union with the curtain rod as if it were an indecency — all these, and the solemn hush that pervaded it, slowly gathering Sunday by Sunday like a rising sea, made it less like a sitting-room than a grave. It was obviously furnished out of the bequests of a great many people with tastes that agreed, as a rule, only in being execrable. The room seemed full of the waste products of ineffectual lives — full, indeed, to repletion. The wills had been thorough; everything had come. Great-Aunt Darke's two emu eggs, her alabaster vase and its red wool mat were here as well as her Chinese cabinet and her own harsh portrait. Another great-aunt, who seemed to have been gentler than most of them, and not well-dowered with this world's goods, had left a sampler and three shells with 'the sea in them', as Amber used to say. 'You mean, the mighty sea,' Catherine corrected, for she liked things on a grand scale. And Jasper, Sunday after Sunday, irritated his mother and suffered severe slappings by reason of his unceasing question, uttered in a low but obstinate voice: 'Why is the sea in the shells, Mamma? Who put it there, Mamma? Who made it sing?'

There were a few beautiful things in the drawing-room, but they were obscured by the rest. An exquisite Chinese plate hung among a crowd of others painted with flowers by ladies of Dormer; a delicate French fan was nailed up between two of grandmother's home-made ones,

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constructed of fowls' breasts and wings not always very perfectly cured. In these, which appeared all over the house, were immortalized many excellent dinners, when the Plymouth Rock or the Dorking had given its flesh for the physical and its feathers for the æsthetic well-being of the family. A small carved chest, that looked as if it might once have sheltered love-letters, held grandmother's feather duster, with which she daily stirred the ancient dust that settled on all these things as of indisputable right. On a work-table near the fire were a few silver trinkets, which caused great vexation to Mrs. Cantlop. This good lady had become, perhaps through ceaseless concentration on the desirability of Mr. Cantlop's finding gold, a harmless kleptomaniac. She was what Sarah called 'a magpie to metal'. Though she was the most transparently honest soul in Christendom, it always happened that her large black silk apron was quite lumpy with things concealed beneath it by the end of the evening at Dormer. Sometimes Mrs. Velindre pounced upon the first offence; sometimes she waited. To-night she pounced.

'What are you doing with my grandson's christening spoon, Amelia Cantlop?'

'Doing?' said Mrs. Cantlop, very flustered, and obviously extracting it from her apron. 'I was just minding me what a sweet baby Jasper was!'

She melted into tears. She did this as naturally and easily as snow melts in a warm spring. The feat was very mysterious to Mrs. Velindre, whose emotions were in perpetual cold storage.

'Not your baby, anyway,' said Mrs. Velindre.

'And eh! how the poor child cried when the Sign was put on him! It seemed like something boded.'

'That was Sattan coming out!' said grandmother complacently. 'He's in all young children.'

'Not in Jasper, I'm sure! For Keturah's father said —'

'He couldn't say. He'd gone to look for gold ten years back when the child was born. You've no head for dates, Amelia Cantlop!'

'I was always thought a great one at my book,' said Amelia valiantly.

'You can't mind the big holly being felled!'

'I can! And I mind Keturah's father picking a leaf off it and writing with a pin: "Love, honour and cherish!"'

'H'm! Fine words! But he didn't act up to 'em.'

'We are all weak mortals,' said Mrs. Cantlop. 'Only the Spouse never faileth.'

While Ernest said 'the Captain', Sarah — "Im above", Mrs. Gosling —

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'the Lamb', and grandmother — 'the lion of Judah', Mrs Cantlop said 'the Spouse'. She let it be tacitly understood that in Mr. Cantlop's place the Spouse would long ago have found gold.

Ernest came softly up to Jasper, leaning over him, laying a large white hand on his shoulder, murmuring with his slight lisp —

'My dear fellow, remember your baptism!'

Jasper flung round. 'What the deuce has my baptism to do with you?'

'You cannot annul it; you cannot spoil it; you cannot get away from it. What we have, we keep.'

'Shut up! I won't argue.'

'I hope we shall be fast friends,' said Ernest. He held that a clergyman's work was threefold — to persuade, to punish and to pardon. At present he was trying the first.

'You only want to be friends in order to convert me to your peculiar superstition.'

Ernest waived this. 'I am gregarious,' he said.

This was so true, as all Ernest's acquaintances knew to their cost, that Jasper smiled. Encouraged by this, Ernest added:

'Also, I am responsible, dear lad, for your eternal welfare!'

'Who gave you authority over me?'

'The voice of ordained authority,' said Ernest, in what he judged to be the typical tone of that authority, 'is the voice of God.'

'What did you get ordained for?' Jasper inquired.

'I took Holy Orders because I was called.'

'You took them,' said Jasper, 'because Great-Uncle Swyndle left his money to the first relation to take orders.'

Ernest was saved the necessity of a reply by the departure of the guests. This was always thrilling when Mrs. Cantlop was present. To-night grandmother suddenly shouted 'The Rector's going!' in her sleepy ear, and then waited eagerly, her eyes fixed on Mrs. Cantlop's apron. There was a silvery clatter of spoons, paper knives and matchboxes, and Mrs. Cantlop departed, drowsy, tearful and under a cloud, leaning on the Rector's kindly arm. The Rector himself was depressed, for he found conversation with Ernest a great strain.

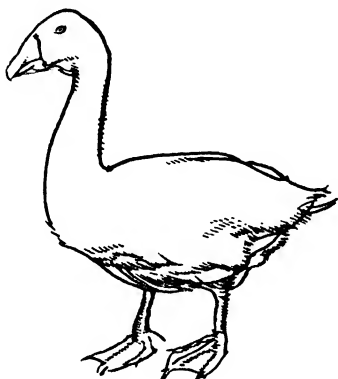
'Great-Aunt,' said Ernest, when they had gone, 'you may like to see my little paper on hymns. I read it at the Keep. Comprehensive, we hope. Tolerant, we know. I have included the hymns of other churches as well as Mother Church.' (He had given a quarter of a page to all hymns other than those of the English Church.)

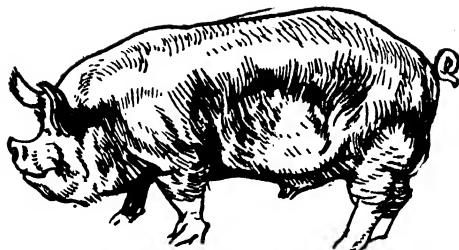
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'They are outside salvation,' said grandmother. 'They can't write hymns.'

'Well, well, Great-aunt, they try. We must not quench the smoking flax. We must sympathize even with them that are without.'

'Without are dogs!' said grandmother succinctly.





CHAPTER SEVEN

HARVEST PREPARATIONS

It was the vigil of the Harvest Festival, a week after Ernest arrived. The days preceding Harvest or Christmas were red days at Dormer — a time of fluttered henroosts and agitated pigsties, when the air was full of shrieks and the yard ran with blood. In Sarah's calendar they were called 'skriking-tide'. Sarah's calendar was peculiar. She had red-letter days unknown to the churches. She was accustomed to say: 'When the geese go a-stubbling, I take to my linsey petticoat. When the last chick cracks out, I cast my cross-over.' In the harvest preparations she stalked about the yard grimly, her shoes reinforced with pattens, accomplishing, with Mrs. Gosling's help, feats of skill and muscle — hacking pork into joints, trussing the goose, dressing fowls.

Mrs. Gosling dressed fowls with the air of important resignation with which she always brooded over death, whether that of a near relation, a king or a spring chicken. She was 'layer-out' for the neighbourhood. Dressing poultry was only her secondary gift, but she surrounded it with the same pomp and ceremony.

She would murmur: 'A beautiful corpse in the coffin, mum! The tidiest I ever laid out.' Or: 'A grand bird on the table, mum! The best I ever drew.' And in both sentences her voice was exactly the same. She was small and quiet. She seldom made a direct statement. It was a symbol of her apologetic attitude to life that the most obvious fact was modified in deference to the listener. She 'liked a drop of something heartening' and was down in the Rector's private parish book as 'oinos'. There Solomon figured as 'sound'; Peter had a capital D, for difficult; Jasper only possessed

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a large query. This book was jealously guarded by the Rector. He locked it with a silver key which he regularly left in his trouser pocket when he changed into his Sunday suit, thus enabling Mrs. Cantlop to have some interesting reading.

Sarah sat by the kitchen fire. She was expecting Mrs. Gosling, Marigold and Enoch, who lived across the water at the foot of the woods and sometimes came in when they had 'cleaned' themselves. This was the happiest moment of Sarah's day, for she was exercising her artistic faculties. On the table stood a large stone ball, such as ornaments old gateways. Beside it was a heap of broken crockery. On the hob simmered a pot of gluc. Sarah was fixing bits of china, reduced to the required size with a hammer, to the stone ball. This she called her 'world'. It was, so far, her most ambitious effort. She had done a seven-pound jam-pot, a 'pair o' vawses' and other works, which shone with varnish on the mantelpiece. The kitchen, dusky and draughty, was paved with large grey flags, cracked and chipped at the corners. In the centre of the high mantelpiece stood a mortar and a pestle, round the white end of which the mouths of all the young Darkes had been stretched. Flanking this were the vases. To the right hung the cuckoo clock, with which Sarah found herself very much in accord, for it startled the air like a summons to battle, and the kitchen was the scene of a deadly daily battle between Sarah and inanimate things. Opposite the clock was Sarah's one picture — the photograph of the grave of a little girl (unknown to Sarah) who had distinguished herself by dying from the effects of pushing a bead into her ear. This lugubrious oddity suited a vein of religious fatalism in Sarah and Mrs. Gosling. They were never so content as when, over cups of very strong tea, they solemnly regarded the photograph in its frame of varnished chestnuts and remarked, shaking their heads: 'Ah! Poor thing! It was to be. 'Im above was 'ware of that bead afore ever it was blowed. Some met think it was for this. Some met think it was for that. But 'E knowed as it was for Jemima Onions' ear and a summons to glory!'

As Sarah hammered, conscious of a large batch of successful cheesecakes in the oven, she heard Enoch come across the yard from milking. Then he rubbed one shoulder against the door, which was his way of knocking. Having taken the pails to the dairy, he sat down and began to steam, diffusing an atmosphere of manure, and watching Sarah from his shechinah with a wondering stare.

'Well?' said Sarah, operating on half a teacup.

'Well?'

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'Enoch Oddman! You'm the most aggravating man. All eyes and no tongue!'

'Eh?'

'There he goes! "Eh?" Words met be gold the way you 'usband 'em.'

Enoch's contemplative gaze wandered round the kitchen.

'What dun you want me to say?' he asked. His voice had a sing-song tone which always made Amber think of wind in the pine-tree. Enoch was a silent soul. Solomon chose to consider him daft, and acquired him cheaply on that account. His name was Gale, but he was called after his profession, as is often the case in the country. Sarah did not reply to his question, but opened the oven door and took out the cheesecakes.

'When I wed,' she said dreamily, breaking off a bit of crust for Enoch, 'im as I choose'll get a plenty of these — a plenty.'

'Dear now!' Enoch spoke in the midst of chumbling. 'It eats short.'

'Short? Ah! I'd as lief some folks 'ud be as short. They take as long, some folks do, axin' to wed, as if they were saved in Paradise with all eternity to sing in under their wings.'

'Serious things,' said Enoch slowly, 'inna able to be done quick. They mun be gone into in good sadness.'

'Mr. Ernest inna of your mind.'

'Eh?'

'Any oonty can see he's after 's Ruby. Nor 'e wunna let the time pass like some does. Tick, tack! Tick, tack! and the hours hooting and nought done. And Mr. Ernest's an example to go by, seeing he's a surplussed clergyman (and a good few yards it takes to go round 'im) and seeing as he can preach the whiskers off a cat.'

'Oh!'

'And I'll tell you this, Enoch Oddman, though you dunna deserve to know ought, for Mr. No-eyes is your name. I'll tell you this' (she lowered her voice to the awed and mysterious tone in which one might speak of elocutionary marvels such as the self-expression of Balaam's ass), 'e'll speak to-morrow! Ah! I seed him telling it over to himself very solemn, not out loud, but talking to 'is mommets! Sarah, my girl, I says, to-morrow in the flush of words (for it's like a cloudburst when Mr. Ernest preaches the Word) his tongue being oiled, and the words boiling in his yead, he wunna be able to stop, and he'll speak.'

'Ah!' Enoch was still indifferent.

'Eh, oh, ah!' mocked Sarah. 'Eh, oh, ah! You're like the Christian Minstrels Rector got down to liven us up, choir treat. It was twang,

twang! and eh, oh, ah! and thrum! thrum! like 'earts at a Hiring Fair, till I was fair melancholy.'

Enoch smiled, but his eyes did not lose their wistful, rather bemused expression — the look of one just awakened from sleep-walking. This made him kin to the animals, for it is in their eyes, from the humblest to the fiercest. What are animals but souls walking in their sleep — personalities still overdone by matter, prisoned in the early stages of evolution amid the necessities of lust and blood? Yet there, even in the eyes of a cat as it laps the blood of its victim, you may see the disquieted spirit looking on with the startled wonder of a child that has set the house afire. It is as if the animals saw, confused as the reflections in running water, what they are and what they would be; as if they glimpsed the possibility of breaking loose from the vast machine of multitudinous physical bondage — from bloodshed, wrath, the competitive struggle for life — and saw their little spirits, shivering and afraid, but free, on the dark hills of futurity. Anyone who cared to study Enoch came upon a mystery, discovering a being so near the animal world that he could easily interpret the vague half-thoughts of a sheep or a cow, yet so far advanced along the road of psychic development that most of the other inhabitants of Dormer were pigmies compared with him. None of them, except Jasper and perhaps Amber, were conscious of their own souls; they were still asleep, and in their sleep they mouthed the old righteousness of their forefathers. Enoch was awake. Though he had not been roused by the sharp, clear trumpet of intellect, he had heard in the twilight of semi-consciousness the drowsy bell of intuition.

Enoch was never quite at his ease in Dormer. He liked to be out on the huge purple hills under the towering sky, where the curlews cried out strange news to him in passing, and the little brown doves murmured of a hidden country, a secret law, more limited than those of man, yet more miraculous. For there, to dream a nest is to build it. To desire the sea, or an orange tree in Africa, is to obtain it. Genius and love are the nearest approach we have made to this wholly mysterious life. They are akin to it, though they are at once greater and more subject to mistakes. There is something in that blind shaping of nests and cocoons and cells, in that strange swinging out in sightless faith into the limitless air that we have not yet understood.

Sarah stirred her glue like a dark-browed witch. She was what is known as hard-favoured.

'What's Master Jasper lay tongue to when he comes round along of you?' she asked.

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Enoch contemplated her in silence. Sarah stamped.

'Deaf as a post and dumb as mutton. What a man!'

There was a soft fumbling at the door.

'That's ours,' remarked Enoch. This was his usual way of indicating his aunt, while Sarah was 'the 'oman'. Mrs. Gosling entered, saying that she partly thought it was seasonable weather. Sarah was beginning work on a vase that seemed quite intact.

'You're never going to take and break that?' said Mrs. Gosling. Enoch looked from the vase to Sarah with an expression that said, 'There's nothing she won't do!'

'It's 's Catherine's,' explained Sarah. 'I'm obleeged to break more things for her than for any of 'em, though the old lady runs her pretty close.

'I partly think the old lady's grave-ripe, poor thing,' said Mrs. Gosling, 'er's looking very middlin'.'

'She's looking what she is,' remarked Sarah, 'and downy's the world. The things she'll do! Ah! There's a good few of 'er Uzit bottles on the World! But this vawse of 's Catherine's I'm obleeged to break along of her making game of me in that letter to her auntie. "Poor Sarah!" she says. "Poor vawse!" says Sarah.'

Sarah was obliged to break people's china when they offended her. It was not spite. It was a judgment, inevitable, just, as the judgment of God. You offended Sarah — you lost a vase. And, by the poetry of things, your loss was Sarah's gain, and your forfeited ornament went to the building of Sarah's *magnum opus*.

'She's sleek, is 's Catherine,' continued Sarah. 'But she's got sharp claws, like a little cat! I can't abide cats! Out, you cats!'

She seized a broom and dislodged a tabby cat and kitten from the fender. Then the dining-room bell rang, and Sarah, after some grumbling, answered it. Returning, she said: 'They're ravening sore in the room. Master Jasper red as a layer's comb, and 's Amber roaring crying.'

'What ails 'em?' asked Mrs. Gosling.

'Im above knows! But it's always passion-tide in this 'ouse, I'm thinking.'

'There'll come a day,' said Enoch in a low and singing voice, 'when this bitter old 'ouse will fa-a-al.'

'Fall?' said Sarah. 'When the walls are six bricks through and solid as my aunt Sophy, that weighed fourteen stone on her wedding day, so when it came to "ave and 'old" the bridegroom looked right scared. But the best man nudged and the parson gave the word, so he spit on his 'ands, and said it like a man.'

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'It'll fa-a-al,' said Enoch, 'like a waspy apple. It'll fa-a-al like rotten leaves. And it'll fa-a-al in the night with a weight of shadows on it.'

'But that dunna tell us why they're chevy-chasing the lad,' Sarah said, fetching refreshments as Marigold came in.

Marigold was very young, very dewy, a limpidly sweet nonentity — a soulless fairy still asleep in the dawn-cold flower of youth. She sat down by her mother and began without more ado to eat pig's chitterlings and onions. As nobody thought of chitterlings with anything but respect, nobody thought Marigold was doing violence to her beauty.

'I partly think,' said Mrs. Gosling, 'as Master Jasper's taken on soft and got religious. There's a tidy few does. Old Lady Camperdine got it and went for a Catholic. The last Sunday she ever come to Dormer Church, she took and shied the gathering bag at the Rector's yed, with folks' money in it and all. A beautiful corpse she made, too! Maybe Master Jasper's found God all of a sudden!'

'Oh, God,' Sarah spoke with an air of indifference. Her religion took the colour of her mind — materialistic. Like a pool, it received whatever was dropped into it. Every Sunday she tolerated the Rector's sermon. She understood that if she committed no overt act of disobedience against certain arbitrary laws, benefit would accrue to her. Heaven would, she felt, be difficult, but worth while, because so many people wanted to get there and never would. God, in her eyes, was a person who dispensed limited favours for the pleasure of observing the antics of humiliation in which the recipients were obliged to indulge. Respectability was the end and aim of life. To be in comfortable circumstances was a great credit to anyone. Such things as love, sacrifice, spiritual beauty, when mentioned in the Bible, must be taken with a grain of salt, as being written by men who lived in a very hot place and were nesh. The kind of love that meant arms round waists, smacking kisses and an eventual wedding was, of course, different.

'To my mind,' she said, 'it's more like love than religion.'

She privately thirsted for love affairs, though usually denouncing them in public.

'Miss Catherine?' asked Marigold.

'Maybe yes. Maybe no. But she wunna stay true to Master Jasper. She's for Master Peter and the 'ouse.'

'That she never is!' Marigold spoke suddenly and violently.

'You know a deal,' said Sarah.

'Where you bin since you cleaned yourself?' asked Mrs. Gosling. 'And what'n you bin doing?'



N O R M A N N E P H E W N O T C E A S I N G

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'Nowt.'

Marigold's cheeks were very red.

Enoch's eyes, dwelling on her, were troubled.

At this moment the prayer bell rang. Marigold got up to go with a light in her eyes. Sarah also got up with 'Prayers, drat 'em!'

But before they could go, Ernest entered.

'My man,' he said, 'how is it I never see you at family prayers?'

Enoch preserved his far gaze and his silence.

Sarah, anxious to get the day's work done, said in commiserating tones: 'Seems like he's got a lattance in the speech, sir. He'll sit the day-long mum as a Luke-tide fly. The mouth-mauling as I give un! And all wasted!'

Ernest looked at Enoch with the interest of a doctor diagnosing a difficult case.

'An impediment!' he exclaimed, and added with militant cajolery, 'A man in the Bible had an impediment. It need not frighten you away. Keep together! All in One!'

These encouraging phrases beat upon Enoch's placidity like waves on a granite promontory. Sarah's stern mouth so far relaxed as to smile at the cheesecakes.

'Remember,' Ernest concluded, with authority tempered by benevolence, 'I shall look for you. I shall expect you. Don't be afraid. "Just as I am," you know, "just as I am."'

Ernest retired, confident of victory.

'Got 'im?' queried grandmother sharply, as she would have questioned a rat-catcher.

'I think so — I trust so,' said Ernest blandly, looking out for the evening's reading the chapter about the man with the impediment.

'I think *not*,' murmured Jasper. He wandered out to the kitchen and sat down opposite Enoch. He found rest in the company of this being who neither asserted nor denied, but remained aloof, a soul crude and simple, but its own.

They had the kitchen to themselves, for Mrs. Gosling had gone to take her nightcap in luxurious solitude. Enoch was waiting for Marigold. He knew that these walks through the star-fruited wood were soon to end, for now that the Dormer family was larger, Marigold was to 'live in', sharing Sarah's attic.

The kitchen door was open and that of the dining-room ajar. A hive-like murmur came along the passage.

'Enoch,' said Jasper, 'are we astray or are they?'

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'Master Jasper, if Mr. Ernest was astray he wunna'd stray far. They'd find un by his blaating.'

'No, but, Enoch, seriously, what do you think?'

'Oh, if it's to be in good sadness, Master Jasper, I canna say fairer than - "I dunna know." May-'appen we'm all strays. Maybe we'll ne'er find out till Time's gone by. But I canna see as it's to be found out,' he nodded sideways towards the murmur, 'that-a-way. Nor yet from a bit of a four-leaf clover on Mr. Ernest's belly.'



CHAPTER EIGHT

ERNEST SPEAKS

WHEN Ruby woke next morning, the early harvest bells were ringing up the valley, the rooks were loquacious in the upper woodlands, and Sarah was thundering on Ernest's door.

'Mr. Ernest shanna say Sarah Jowel started un late the day he's askin' to wed!' she said to Marigold. 'For ask to wed he will, afore dark.'

Soon Sarah appeared with an unwonted cup of tea for Ruby, and Ruby's happiness increased. For she loved a cup of tea, strong and creamy, and a picture book and a soft pillow; and at the back of her mind was the thought that Ernest would certainly 'speak' to-day. She raised her beautiful and indolent body sufficiently to drink.

'Has Miss Catherine had some?' she asked.

's Catherine's not,' was the reply. 'For she's gone to the seven o'clock, and when 'er goes to that 'er clems. Though why 'Im above should take it unkind if she went full, is more than Sarah Jowel knows. I'm as earnest after religion as most, but my stomach's my own.'

So saying, she flung back the curtains, and there was Ruby in a flood of yellow sunshine, friendly to her young splendour, but cruel to Amber, who was leaning from her window drinking the golden day.

Ernest also was up, looking very pink and clean, reading in a new little manual he had brought with him, which was a service of prayer for those contemplating marriage. It began with a prayer before the proposal, and went straight on, as it were, on the crest of the wave, to the banns, the wedding, and the children. What happened if 'the answer was no', as Enoch would say, did not appear. Only the successful were catered for. To do Ernest justice, he meant very well in reading this book. He nearly

always did mean well. He wished to do right and he wished others to do right in his way. What would have happened if his church, instead of telling him that what he wanted was right, had told him that what he wanted was wrong, it is not easy to say. Fortunately, it had never yet happened. Ernest knew it was right for him to marry Ruby, and rear a large family. Ruby's point of view never occurred to him.

'Well, 's Ruby,' said Sarah, 'you do take the eye!'

She felt romance tingling in the air. Romance, to her, did not depend on anything so ephemeral as love. So long as the dresses, the cake, and some sort of a bridegroom were got together, what else mattered?

And Ruby, sipping her tea, basking in the sunshine, idly admiring the texture of her skin under the light, and the full curve of her breast, was of very much the same opinion.

That which Sarah had prophesied duly came to pass. After the service Ernest hurried out of the vestry in his cassock and detained Ruby, who was lingering rather expectantly. They wandered beneath the swart yews, which canopied the churchyard mournfully, shadowing the grotesquely shaped tombs — obelisks and sarcophagi, needles of stone, an immense triple-tiered round erection of fluted marble, like a wedding cake, and a stout stone boy, apparently of negroid extraction. All these tombs were greened over by lichen, and as Ruby and Ernest walked under the trees their faces took a greenish tint, as if upon them also it had gathered. Keturah Cantlop's grave was smothered with waxen wreaths in glass cases, for Mrs. Cantlop added a new one every Easter. She thought them far more beautiful than real flowers. The little mound, thus decorated, lying so darkly by the water under the heavy yews, had given Ruby a great distaste for white flowers.

When they came to it she shivered and turned away. Ernest did not notice. He was flushed and heated with the service and with the consciousness of having preached a successful sermon. As Sarah would have said, he was 'flown with words'. Mrs. Cantlop, who enjoyed many a half-hour's nap under the mellifluous ebb and flow of Ernest's self-expression, said, when Ernest's preaching was criticized in her presence: 'Ah, well! He has a gift for imparting knowledge.' To this Catherine had rather tartly replied: 'If only he had any to impart!'

Ernest was, therefore, pleased with himself, Ruby and their background of the world in general. He was only waiting to gravitate again to the scene of his triumph until Solomon and Mr. Arkinstall had gone. These two found the vestry convenient for their weekly talk. Before church they

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argued. During the service they seethed. Afterwards they quarrelled bitterly.

When they came out, Ernest said: 'Come into the vestry, Cousin Ruby.' She was not his cousin, but Ernest liked what he called the homely ties and titles of relationship, and if they were not there, he invented them. The atmosphere of the vestry, though not so sacrosanct as that of the church, was still sufficiently hassocky. Ernest sniffed it and found it very good. The vestry was under the belfry at the west end, and was curtained off from the church, so that the choir (who came in humbly one by one in ordinary dress, conscious of their inferiority as mere men) might robe in decent seclusion and emerge suddenly, surpliced and looking quite different from their week-day selves, when the sexton flung back the curtain with his dramatic gesture.

'Sit down, Ruby,' said Ernest, proffering the sexton's carved chair and himself taking the small one with the rush seat (a great concession).

Ruby felt embarrassed and alarmed, and rather as if she were going to have an operation.

In the dark-stained window above, blue-bottles buzzed, drunk with the fruit of the harvest decorations. Ruby's eyes strayed upwards. She caught herself thinking, as she watched them crawling, so tight and well-found, that they looked as if they wore cassocks.

Ernest did not hesitate. He knew what he intended to say, and he said it.

'Cousin Ruby, you must be mine! You *shall* be mine!'

'Why?'

Ruby was pleasantly conscious of a very pretty openwork yoke, and she looked up disconcertingly through a long, loosened strand of bright hair.

'Is it because you think I'm pretty, Ernest?'

Ernest moistened his lips.

'Looks are nothing, Ruby. It is a meek and quiet spirit that I ask in woman.'

'Would you love me if I was like Mrs. Gosling?'

'Don't be flippant, Ruby.'

'But don't you like people to be pretty?'

'If looks are an index to the mind. But bodily beauty interests me very little.'

He looked long at the bright hair, the cream-and-roses skin, and licked his lips again.

'Amber says, if you love a person, you love them because of the *me* in them. Because they're them and nobody else. Will you love me that way and never say "clumsy!" or "stupid!" or "foolish!"'

Ernest thought it best to refrain from all mention of moulding, and not to give her any hint that her value lay in her ductility to the hand of the potter.

'So it is yes, Ruby?' He took her hand in his large white one.

'Oh, it isn't real,' cried Ruby suddenly. 'Amber said you felt all different, and I don't. It will be dull being married, if I feel just the same as I do now.'

For a moment Ernest's soul, or his conscience, or his essential self was pricked into a mistrust of itself. The 'sense of tears' which, in a world brimful of tears, must visit the most self-satisfied at times, stirred in him as he looked at Ruby's childish face and heard her callow questionings. Then he pulled himself together, cast aside his doubts and fell back upon custom and the letter of the law. Once more his spirit lay inert, a partially atrophied organ embedded in the fatty deposit of expediency.

'Of course! Of course!' he said comfortably. 'We feel different. Quite, quite different.'

This was true. He was feeling uncomfortably warm and was perspiring a good deal.

'Yes, Ruby?' he suggested helpfully.

Ruby indicated that it was yes, and Ernest kissed her. Ruby edged away.

'Oh, your mouth is hot, Ernest! Hot and slow like —' she had almost said — 'like a blue-bottle.' She felt as if the row of surplices that hung in folds characteristic of their wearers, watched and criticized. There was the Rector's straight and spare, seeming to deprecate tatting; Mr. Arkinstall's, long, with a kind of smug droop; Ernest's own, starched and robust; Mr. Dank's (he was organist) almost hidden beneath that of Mr. Mallow, the constable. Mr. Mallow's was the largest of all. It was his astral self. It hung in the swelling folds admired of Sarah. It was like a football from which the inside is removed — a touch will collapse it, but until the touch comes, it seems to be the same round, hard ball as ever. By virtue of it Mr. Mallow's presence, breathing Law, still haunted the vestry.

Ernest was huffy, with some excuse. He took off his cassock and said 'Home!' while Ruby still eyed the blue-bottles with fascinated disgust. Going out, in her confusion and hurry, she stepped on one of the trailing bell-ropes, and down from the belfry came a tiny mournful toll. Going out between the sheaves of corn, Ruby's eyes, which had been vacant and asleep, took a gleam of wakefulness, and within the wakefulness was a seed of fear.

When they told their news to the family, grandmother smacked her

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lips. To the old, or the mentally unoccupied, or the spiritually slumbrous, events are a stimulant — almost their only stimulant. Grandmother was not at all interested in the thoughts of those she lived with, but she was absorbedly interested in their doings. Let them fall from heaven to hell in the life of the soul — grandmother would not be aware of the slightest change in their condition; but let them cease to take sugar in their tea — grandmother was all agog in a moment. So now it was she and not Mrs. Darke who questioned as to the date of the wedding.

Ruby giggled.

'Soon, Great-aunt, soon!' said Ernest.

'Where'll you live?' asked Solomon, who, as he said, scented mischief.

'Well, if convenient —' Ernest looked at Mrs. Darke, with whom he had already prudently arranged matters.

'They'll live here,' said she.

'Until I attain my vicarage.'

Ernest always spoke of this vicarage as if it were a-building for him in some terrestrial foretaste of Paradise, and were his for the taking. This attitude annoyed Catherine, her contempt for Ernest being extreme.

'You've had one offered you, then?' she asked, in the smooth, Persian-cat manner which made Sarah so wrathful.

'Well, to be accurate, not yet, not exactly.'

Ernest generally went to pieces when in conflict with Catherine. Then he reflected that Catherine was perhaps jealous of Ruby; he rallied.

'Though, until I get my vicarage, I shall not need a helpmeet, I do want a companion,' he explained. 'It is not good for man to live alone.'

'Alone? In this house?' Jasper spoke with a kind of bitter wonder. His eyes, travelling round the room, were so full of mingled disgust and half-comic dismay that Amber with difficulty kept her gravity.

'Never alone!' said grandmother. 'There is an Eye that watches. There is an Ear that hears.'

Ernest adjusted his collar, beaming. 'I'm gregarious — gregarious,' he said.

Jasper groaned.

'I love my fellows, and I hope — I may say I think — that my fellows love me.'

He had the unconscious conceit of those temperamentally gregarious people with whom companionship has become a lust; who think they are always wanted; who mistrust and hate the lonely soul that does not want them. Eventually, these people become exasperated with the non-social being and (by way of a cure) shut him up with a great many other people

in some prison of the body or of the mind. Very often the first time in his life when the unfortunate being is allowed the privilege of loneliness is when he lies, at last, in his grave.

'Yes, I am sociable — very sociable. But one needs more. One need, in short, a wife, one with whom to share the lifelong eucharistic sacrament of marriage.'

'No popery!' cried grandmother suspiciously. The word eucharist always annoyed her. She and Ernest did not agree very well, he being 'High' and she 'Low', he saying 'Ah-brah-am', while she said 'Ay-brah-am'. Such a difference even religion could not bridge. At this point Ruby, who had been staring at Mrs. Darke like one hypnotized, suddenly burst into a torrent of words.

'Live here? Live here? But when people are married, they have their own house, and furnish it and have presents and a storeroom —'

'When Ernest gets his bishopric you'll have all that, dear,' said Catherine. But Ruby took no notice. She was stirred to the depths of her not very deep personality.

'If I can't have a house and a storeroom and a trousseau, what's the use of getting married?'

She burst into loud crying. Ernest came forward and laid his well-kept right hand on her shoulder.

'You will have *me*,' he said with suave simplicity.

Ruby looked up at him with an expression that seemed to Amber to say that Ernest was the fly rather than the ointment. She cried louder. But grandmother saved the situation. She tapped her stick with authority.

'Clothes! The child must have clothes for the credit of the family. She's gotten what she has in a pretty pickle! Hey! She's a tomboy, and so you'll find, Great-nephew!'

Ernest looked as though he were prepared to mould any quantity of tomboys into patterns of wifeliness.

'Gowns! She shall be brought unto him in a raiment of needlework. I must have a new one too, and a cap.' She eyed her daughter, conscious of temerity.

'No bow,' said Mrs. Darke.

'I *will* have a bow! My grand-daughter's being married, ain't she?'

'You're too small, Mamma.'

'Son-in-law!' cried grandmother.

'Ma'am?'

'You must have out the closed carriage and Enoch must drive us to the Keep. There are some nice new caps at Mrs. Griffin's, with *small bows* —'

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this with a pleading glance at her daughter — 'for Sarah saw 'em last time she was there. When was it, Sarah?'

'Monday was a week, mum,' said Sarah, sweeping crumbs with the action of a mower.

'So you'll order the carriage, Son-in-law?'

'I suppose so, ma'am; eh, Rachel?'

Mrs. Darke nodded. At once the closed carriage, Enoch and Mrs. Griffin became enrolled in the book of destiny.

Ruby brightened. Edging away from Ernest's hand, she sat down at her grandmother's feet with a confiding air.

'Will you buy me frocks, Granny?'

Among Mrs. Velindre's good qualities was a certain generosity which, though perverse and variable, could always be counted on at an occasion like this. For she loved a merrymaking almost as much as a funeral. She was just going to assent when Mrs. Darke said: 'You will have what's proper, Ruby.'

'There! Kiss your mother, Ruby,' said Ernest. Ruby did so, murmuring:

'White satin and a veil?'

'Is white satin suitable to a country girl?' asked Catherine non-committally. She had a way of managing people through these vague questions. 'Why not muslin?' she added.

'Ruby would look very nice in satin,' said Amber, 'and not nearly so nice in muslin.'

Mrs. Darke hesitated. It was really a satisfactory match. The economy of it pleased her, for it was only a case of telling Sarah to move Ruby's things into Ernest's room, and of having Ruby's food paid for by Ernest. Yes. It must be encouraged. But white satin was absurd.

'What does Great-nephew say?' asked grandmother.

'I don't care what he says!' cried Ruby, stamping, and drowning a murmured — 'Not in putting on of apparel.' 'If I can't have satin, I won't marry you, Ernest. There!'

Ernest moistened his lips slightly. Decidedly moulding was required. But for the present —

'Well, Great-aunt, I think Ruby would look well, very well, in satin. It would do for parties after,' he added frugally.

'At the Palace,' murmured Catherine.

'Very well, Ruby,' said Mrs. Darke. 'White satin and no nonsense.'

'No nonsense!' echoed grandmother firmly, but with a sneaking fear that caps with bows — even small ones — were nonsense.

ERNEST SPEAKS

'Can we go soon?' Ruby's spirits were rising fast. 'Can we have the band to dance with and a knife and fork tea?'

'I don't see why not,' said Solomon. 'The first to go and all.'

'Only I'm not going!' Ruby's lips trembled again.

'Very well,' said Mrs. Darke, seeing another outbreak imminent.

Ruby was pacified, and Solomon and Ernest were able to retire and discuss the financial side of the affair. For in respectable houses marriage by barter is still the fashion instead of the much more interesting marriage by capture and the rare, seemingly almost unattainable, marriage for love.

Ruby fixed the day, early in November, after very little persuasion. She was dull and her mind was not sufficiently furnished to be any entertainment to her. So the prospect of excitement, a stir, new possessions, was very attractive. As Sarah said, it was all fixed up as neat as egg-and-breadcrumbs.

It never occurred to Ruby that in her passion for the acquisition of goods she was losing herself.



CHAPTER NINE

HOW THEY WENT TO THE KEEP

It was beneath one of the grieved skies of early October that the five women set forth to buy Ruby's finery. Amber noticed how the clouds lay in long bars of faded lilac on a background of pale, irradiant yellow, wherein faint veinings were visible, like those in a sweet pea. Across the lilac and the yellow and the pale golden lines floated on the damp westerly wind small tear-coloured clouds.

Amber's thoughts were sad-coloured also, as she looked out of her window at grandmother's piercing call:

'Grandchildren, I'm waiting!'

Ruby was so boisterously gay, so full of song, so lavish of confidences and childish hugs, that she seemed pathetic, almost tragic. Amber reflected that Ruby lived on the smooth surface of life — a surface that covers all the griefs, the boiling hatreds, the wild impossible loves and the white-hot despairs under a decent exterior. But for all its smoothness, Amber thought, it was only a lava crust. The volcanic fires might break through at any moment, consuming, terrible. She was afraid for Ruby. She felt, as she had felt for Jasper, a creeping dread of something sinister, not coming from without, but lying dormant — a seed of evil — somewhere in the ghostly recesses of the house itself. She hastily counted up her pocket money, destined to be spent at the jeweller's on a watch for

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Ruby. For, as if there were not enough time-pieces at Dormer, Ruby wanted another. Ernest suggested silver; Catherine gun-metal. But Amber was determined that whether Ruby's life were golden or not she should at least have a gold watch.

Grandmother's voice being again uplifted, Amber ran down. The closed carriage was drawn up before the door, and revealed itself as a small brake, to which had been fastened a frame with a brown waterproof top, and curtains all round. Thus was attained the maximum of convenience with the minimum of extravagance. On the box sat Enoch, arrayed for the occasion in his fawn livery coat with silver buttons, and a kind of baby top-hat, rather rough in the nap, trimmed with corded ribbon. The horse-rug discreetly hid his corduroy trousers. Amid all the changes and chances of Enoch's upper garments — working coat, Sunday coat, livery — his nether garments remained immutable, as if to symbolize his scornful attitude towards these ceremonial robes.

'I'm up, and in!' cried grandmother, peering like a brown bird through the brown curtains, rustling from side to side across the straw-covered floor, leaning on her tall stick. She wore her winter cape, a creation of Mrs. Cantlop's, made of multitudinous flounces of brown wool. It was really a charity to give Mrs. Cantlop work of this kind, for without tatting or crochet she was as restless as a sugarless canary. Instead of the usual black satin sunbonnet, Mrs. Velindre wore her state bonnet, a helmet of net and beads tied under her witch-like chin with a huge purple bow.

Ernest, Solomon and Sarah came to 'send' the party, while Marigold and Mrs. Gosling hovered in the shadows of the hall.

'Well, Marigol,' said her mother, as Ruby dashed downstairs with ribbons, veil and scarf flying, 'I'm in behopes the poor thing'll live. She eats hearty and she looks hearty, but I partly think the strapping uns go quickest. There was Polly of the Mill, and there was Mary Anne of the World's End Public, as faded with the fading of the first year, and died at Tummas-tide. But they do say she laughed at a blind man at the lych-gate as stood to bless the bride, so it served un right, seeing the poor fellow was dark.'

'Dunna crake so, Mother. It's easy talking for you with troubles done and nought in mind but dressing poor folk for Judgment. But for them with their troubles to come —'

Mrs. Gosling meditated. Then she said:

'Enoch looks grand to-day! The livery sets him off, and that majenty tie.'

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Marigold tilted her nose scornfully, muttering: 'Enoch, indeed!' and a burning blush ran from neck to forehead.

"s Ruby!" commanded Sarah. 'Wait till I fettle you, or they'll say at the Keep as Dormer folk goes to town with their things daggly all about. But it's Mr. Ernest as ought to tie the laces, for luck.'

Ernest did so with no very good grace; for when he knelt, he liked a hassock.

'I wish Sarah would know her place,' muttered Mrs. Darke.

'Know your place, Sarah!' piped grandmother, who was very much excited.

Sarah folded her arms.

'I thank 'Im above as I know my place as well as most, mum,' she said, mentally selecting one of grandmother's Spode vases for oblation to the 'world'.

Solomon, who had watched them get in and who now scented a domestic disturbance, said: 'Gee hup, Enoch!'

'Up, Solomon! Not "hup",' said Mrs. Darke.

'Up! Up!' shrieked grandmother, like Deborah arousing the Israelites. They swung out of the gate, the curtains flapping; Ruby chattering, losing her purse and finding it again; Catherine sitting, very cool and polite, opposite grandmother, who indulged, at every declivity, in ejaculatory prayer, and took the more mundane precaution, at the worst hills, of prodding Enoch with her stick to remind him to be careful. Meanwhile Solomon took the gundogs into the dining-room, which was forbidden, and sat down with a stiff whisky and soda to concoct a letter to Mr. Arkin-stall which should, without bringing him under the law, convey to that gentleman exactly what he (Solomon) thought of his proposed fee for teaching Jasper to farm.

Sarah, Mrs. Gosling and Marigold retired to the kitchen, where they revelled on cold pie, colder prognostications and green tea, which Mrs. Griffin procured especially for grandmother. Mrs. Velindre always drank this, not because she particularly liked it, but because it reminded her of her youth, which had receded so far into the past that she revered it almost as much as the Bible. If ever Mrs. Griffin was 'out of' green tea, being a very complaisant person, she hated to say so. She, therefore, put down 'green tea' in the bill. But, being very honest, she only charged the price of black. Whereupon grandmother cried jubilantly: 'Green tea's gone down!' and enjoyed the black inordinately.

Ernest went to his room to touch up a little book of sermons which 'friends at the Keep' had asked him to publish. No one could ever find

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out who these friends were. Catherine suggested that they must have been his landlady, who couldn't read, and her son, who was deaf and had not heard them. It was to be called 'Gleanings from the Sermons of a Parish Priest'. Sarah, dipping into it while doing Ernest's room, remarked to Marigold: 'If this is only the leasing, God save us from the stools.'

Meanwhile, the equipage trundled along through the lonely, deep, dim-burning countryside. First through the outer precincts of Dormer forest, where the tall beeches and the mountain ash trees, slender and haughty in their flaming scarlet, seemed to give as little heed to the passing of the carriage, with its tumult of human tongues, as to the crawling of a brown beetle in the grass, but remained, wrapped in their age-long meditation. Here the road lay beside Dormer brook, which flowed — mute, brown, and covert — beneath trees so close and heavy that they plunged the road into green twilight. Tall, early-tinted poplars pricked up, covered with beaten gold, like spires belonging to a worship secret and remote. Sparsely in the hedges grew the pale, infragrant flowers of early autumn — wild snapdragon, scabious, purple and blue, wan yarrow and the forlorn harebell. Amber gathered some of these for Ruby as they walked up the long hill at the foot of which Jenny always stopped, looking round with an appealing air and the expression of a reasonable person putting the case to another reasonable person.

'Tabor on a bit, Jenny, my girl!' said Enoch, and the carriage meandered up the hill.

Amber thought: 'It's autumn with me, cold autumn; and it's never been summer.' It was of the sadness of autumn that she thought — of the tearful harebell and not of the golden spire. For a moment she envied Ruby. She was, at least, plunging into life of some sort. Then suddenly the affair appeared to her startled mind exactly as it was — a compact between ignorant vanity and calculating lust.

'Do you love Ernest?' she asked in a tremor.

Ruby was not offended.

'Well enough,' she said.

'Oh, turn back! Turn back! It's not too late.'

'Too late for what?'

'To save yourself.'

'But I don't want to be saved. I want to be married.'

'Oh, you don't know — you don't think —'

'How do *you* know?'

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Amber paused; she tried to find the explanation of what she knew, how she knew it.

'It's something deep down,' she said, 'far down, like a pool in a mountain hollow. I look down; I see things pass there, faces looking up, hands beckoning. It's as if the things other people have felt come and lean over me. And I see them, far down and faint —'

Ruby laughed, startling the little birds that feasted in the hedges.

'I suppose that's some of Jasper's stuff,' she said. The family always took it for granted that Amber's remarks must be derivative.

'Oh, Ruby! Don't laugh. Think! Wake up! Marrying a man you don't love is being hired at a hiring fair for wives.'

'What things you say! But Ernest does love me.'

'How much?'

'As much as his nature lets him, I expect.'

'Then tell him to go away and increase his capacity.'

Once more the little birds fled up before Ruby's laughter.

'How could he go away when he's curate of Dormer? What would Mamma say? Oh, Ambie, it's a good thing you're going to be an old maid! You would give your young man an awful time!'

An old maid — an old maid! Ruby was unconscious of the sharp pain she had given; of the passionate rebellion she had aroused.

'Yes! She is right,' thought Amber. 'She is marrying. Catherine will marry. Marigold, even Sarah, will marry. But never Amber — who would want Amber Darke?'

She knew her limitations. Yet in some occult way she knew herself sad, not with the grief of emotional sterility, but with the sorrow of the honeyed flower that no bee visits.

'Still,' she said aloud, 'better be lonely for ever than marry without love.'

'Do stop croaking, Ambie, and be nice!'

They walked on in silence, eyed from the leafy layers above by wood-pigeons who lamented in tones impersonal yet impassioned, monotonous yet arresting. It seemed as if that for which they mourned were too old to be remembered, and had vanished, leaving nothing but a moan.

'What are you thinking of?' asked Amber, hoping that Ruby was repenting of her decision.

Ruby looked dreamy.

'I was thinking,' she said, 'that Catherine will be talking Mamma into muslin, and I *will* have satin!'

Amber sighed, looking away across the plain that was rimmed with

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sorrowful blue — the blue of swallows that flash and are gone; the blue of drowned forget-me-nots; the faded blue of old men's eyes; the blue, lucent and pure, of a child's veins; all mingled, running into one another beyond the cloud shadows, all gathered into one sad, perfect circle.

'She wants gold for the maids' dresses!' cried grandmother, gesticulating wonderfully.

Catherine had evidently made good use of her time. She never walked uphill. Her theory was that Jenny was a beast of burden and should therefore have burdens. As for the dresses, gold would not suit Amber. It would show up all her bad points. But herself it would suit. It would make her look like a richly-jewelled Madonna.

'Get in!' said Mrs. Darke. 'Let's get there and get done.'

They climbed in and sat in an atmosphere of displeasure, knowing, without Mrs. Darke saying it, that Mrs. Griffin ought to have come to Dormer, instead of Dormer taking an unnecessary outing and going to Mrs. Griffin. Four times a year, in the spring, at midsummer, at the turn of the year, at Christmas, Mrs. Griffin's head young man visited Dormer in his gig, bringing an evangel of fashion — designs, rolls of material, all kinds of feminine gear. Mrs. Gosling still called him 'the outrider'.

As they neared the Keep, they met gigs and various cows and sheep, the latter wearing the expression of nervous tension which attendance at an auction gives to animals. They adopted the sensible plan, at the Keep, of doing all their buying and selling on one day. The farmer brought his cattle and the wife her butter and both invested in such things as farm and family needed — a sack of flour, a pig, a roll of scarlet flannel. The latter would be purchased from Mrs. Griffin after a sitting of half-an-hour or more. As Sarah said: 'Mrs. Griffin never stings words. Whether you lay out ten pound or ten farthings it's all one, she'll talk till your yead sings.' When they passed Mrs. Griffin's on their way to the inn, there she was in the midst of a crowd of ladies buying for dear life, while their husbands had a final glass.

Dinner was awaiting them, for Mrs. Darke was no niggard where her own dignity was concerned, and liked to order things in style. They sat down in a panelled parlour with so many corners that hardly a panel was of the same size. This had been a great coaching inn, and in Mrs. Vellindre's youth, several times a week, it blossomed with high-born ladies in delicate dresses.

'I mind,' said grandmother, 'how my Aunt Deborah brought me here to buy a white gown to be bishoped in. I was but eleven. The Bishop didn't come often, and you had to get rid of Sattan when you could.'



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I hid an apple-cob in my pocket (Sattan being in me at the time), and the grease showed. Aunt Deborah said: "Bishoped you *may* be. That's the will of the Lord. Birched you *shall* be. That's mine." A very br sk woman was my Aunt Deborah.'

When dinner was over, they went down the short, steep village street to Mrs. Griffin's. When Ruby had emerged from her congratulations (like a strong swimmer from a high sea) business was begun. Then those who came for buttons and those who came for pins were little accounted of; everyone gathered round the Dormer family.

'I want,' said grandmother, 'a purple gown and cap with a purple bow.'

From the window three caps were fetched. Mrs. Griffin's windows were very fascinating. They were many paned, high up from the ground, and bent very slightly into a gentle bow. Within, everything, from boots to velvet, from sugar to sheets, was arranged in neat boxes piled in pigeon-holes. Nothing disdained the neighbourhood of anything else on the counter, and there was a delicious scent of new calico, soap, tea, apples and leather. It was, in fact, the thing dearest to Mrs. Griffin's heart, a blend. From tea to shot silk, from coffee to wine, she loved a blend.

Grandmother sat on a high rush chair, like a thin little bird, balancing one of the caps on her head.

Mrs. Griffin looked at the others.

'A thought — just a thought — too large?' she suggested.

'It would suit Mrs. Cantlop,' said Catherine.

'Ah! Mrs. Cantlop's a fine figure,' said the milliner.

Mrs. Griffin frowned at her. Grandmother was here, and Mrs. Cantlop was not.

'Bulk!' she murmured reassuringly. 'What is bulk to brain?'

'The cap is too large,' said Mrs. Darke. 'Take it away!'

Finally the right cap was found, the yellow silk and the white satin chosen, and all the other fineries bought. They left the shop with a conquering air, conscious that there was comparatively little that they had not bought. The assistants, worn and exhausted, bowed them out. Mrs. Griffin, fresh as ever, talkative as ever, bowed them out, looking at Ruby — cause of all this honourable outlay — with the tranced admiration with which Mr. Cantlop would have looked at a gold mine, could he have found one. Enoch, without emotion, loaded up. Jenny, without emotion, watched him. Only, as she started, she shook her head sadly, patiently, as the Rector might have shaken his over some choirboy's peccadillo. So much useless lumber to be dragged to Dormer! And Amber, tired and quiet in her corner, thinking of Ruby's reason for marrying, and of

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the bridegroom, central figure to all this pomp, and of her own dreadful appearance in the yellow dress, was inclined to agree with Jenny.

The trees, dark, leafy still, but with the rasping music of autumn in their withering boughs, leaned and muttered above them as they passed. As the night wind rose, they seemed to shout a message, a message with no words, a thought expressed in music and moanings. But the voices were so loud within the carriage, raised in altercation about the purchases, that Amber could not listen to it. She only thought: 'The forest is a great artist. It is never paltry, never mean.' Then she drew her coat more closely round her, for coldly with the cold wandering wind came the thought:

'The forest will sing like this when I am dead. I shall die, but I shall not have lived.'





CHAPTER TEN

THE WEDDING

THE great day dawned, as such days often do, in a tumult reminiscent of spring cleaning, preparations for a family holiday and sudden death. At seven, by way of adding her mite to the confusion, grandmother rang for Sarah.

'What is it now, mum?' asked that sorely tired prop of the household.

Grandmother nodded sideways at her new cap, which sat on a knob at the foot of the bed in much the same way as it was to sit on her head, so that knob and cap together looked like grandmother's elf.

'I don't like it,' said Mrs. Velindre. 'My great-niece chose it, and I don't like it. I don't like her either.'

'She's as 'Im above made 'er, mum, but I doubt He didna give full mind to the job. Seconds she is, like the teaset she gave 's Ruby.'

'Is the mistress up?'

'Not yet, thank God!'

'She don't like a merrymaking, Sarah! She pretends she does, but she don't, Sarah!'

Her daughter was the one person of whom she did not speak possessively. It was always 'Rachel', or 'the mistress'. With others it was, 'my great-niece once removed', 'my husband's nephew'. These people, she tacitly implied, had no place in the world except in relation to herself. Possibly the sinking of the possessive in her daughter's case was an un-

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conscious act of homage to an egoism even stronger than her own. These two had been meant for individualists. This not being allowed, they had become egoists, which always happens on the principle that if you deny a child sugar it will steal from the sugar basin. The human mind, unless it is to remain nescient, must have itself, must develop and explore itself. The more vital, the more awake it is, the more it must turn inwards. For within, deep in the tenebrous recesses of sub-consciousness, man hopes to find God. Not in churches, not in his fellows, not in nature will he find God until he has seen all these things mirrored in that opaque and fathomless pool, lying within his own being, of which, as yet, we know nothing. 'Tell my eldest granddaughter to come and furbish it up,' said Mrs. Velindre.

's Amber's along of 's Ruby in the attic. 's Ruby's roaring crying.' 'What? What? What? On the wedding day?'

'It met be she likes the taste of salt, but I know my place too well to inquire, mum.'

'Sarah! Has Mrs. Cantlop got a new one?'

Sarah clicked her tongue.

'Ow, should I know, mum? I'll send 's Amber to you.'

She departed, arriving in the hall just as Enoch staggered up to the door with a huge wedding post.

'Well, you've lugged us a power of things!' said Sarah, arms akimbo.

'I do sweat,' remarked Enoch.

'Ho! You've not begun yet. Come you in and lend a hand!'

Enoch's eyes took on their most cryptic, most bee-like expression, and he was just beginning to say: 'It wunna be able to be done,' when Marigold appeared. She rushed from the kitchen, all dishevelled pink and gold, yellow hair waving, rosy print dress flying.

'Oh, Enoch, Enoch! You mun put the leaves in table for us, they'm going to have the wold big cloth with the farmyard border, and sit down seventeen all told; and there's the trestles in the barn and the yurns to lug from the Rectory—'

Beneath that bewildering smile Enoch became as wax, and spent an hour labouring devotedly.

'Enoch can work as well as one here and there when he likes,' Sarah remarked, pleased with the activity though not with the cause. She turned to Marigold.

'Now, Marigol' Gosling, what ails you, smiling at Master Peter's picture? You met clean the mantel brasses. Anybody 'ud think you'd been to Gauby Market and lost yourself.'

‘The Wedding’

THE WEDDING

'I've done 'em. They wunna come better!'

'I'll show 'em to come better!' cried Sarah. 'From rust to dust, from vardigris to kettle-collow, every dirt's 'ware of its own master. Go an' get the kitchen breakfast. I'm clemmed.'

So the battle raged, above and below; the kitchen fire roaring; Sara shouting; the cuckoo striking every hour too soon; Rectory-Lucy and the other helpers rushing about like frightened hens; Sarah turning out the cats; Enoch bringing them in again; the gundogs howling; Peter lying in wait to startle Marigold, making her drop the Crown Dert sugar-basin; Sarah saying 'it was to be', and storing fragments for the 'world'; Mrs. Darke seven times frozen; Mrs. Cantlop seven times thawed; Marigold in tears for fear she would have to leave; Ruby in tears for fear she wouldn't; Ernest, Solomon, Peter and Jasper all fetching hot water for shaving at different times, each taking, as Mrs. Gosling said, 'the one pot I kep' to scalt the gizzards'; grandmother ringing, unanswered, till the bell broke, when she took refuge in the imprecatory psalm; Amber trying to keep her temper, which was always apt to be hasty, and greatly desiring someone to laugh with; and Enoch, huge, silent, calm, like some carved figure of a god contemplating the hot fury of a market place.

When Amber went to Mrs. Velindre's room, the trouble of the cap was not abated. Box after box had to be pulled out from under the vast bed in the search for cap decorations. Grandmother kept innumerable boxes stored in this way, imagining that the dark green valance would discourage burglars. Sarah knew of the treasures, but as she always freely and openly alluded to them as bonfire fuel, grandmother did not fear for her honesty. What with the boxes, the Christmas-card screens, the feather fans, old gowns, and stacks of *The Lion* tied up with wool, the room was quite stuffed with possessions, which seemed to elbow grandmother's thin body almost out of existence.

When the cap was done, it was time to dress, and then, before she had half finished, there were the carriages — lent for the occasion by various neighbours — and there was Ruby with her veil half on and a very red face refusing to go downstairs unless she could have a definite promise from Ernest as to her dress allowance. Ruby was no weakling, and she seized the strategic hour. So Ernest had to be fetched from the drawing-room, where, before the greenish mirror, he was practising the saying of — 'I will' — soft, loud, modulated, mellifluous, gentle, virile, stentorian. He tried in all ways, and had almost decided upon stentorian, when in came Peter, very sulky, saying: 'The little fool says you're to promise a

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dress allowance or she'll chuck it.' Poor Ernest felt that perhaps 'modulated' would be best. He went up.

'Dear Ruby,' he said, 'such thoughts must not trouble us in this solemn hour. Nay, they shall not.'

'Fix it!' cried Ruby dramatically. 'Fix it, or no wedding!'

'She seems unstrung; she *is* unstrung,' said Ernest.

'Obstinate!' said her mother. 'Obstinate as a mule.'

'A mule — a mule!' sang grandmother.

'The price of a good woman is above rubies,' said Ernest helplessly.

'Fix it!' cried his bride.

So fixed it was. But Ernest was so much disheartened that he could scarcely remember whether, after all, it was to be stentorian or mellifluous. Everything, however, went well in church. Mr. Mallow sang 'Oh, that I had the wings of a dove, for then would I flee away'. This was always a serious strain on Sarah's allegiance to Enoch. On the way back to the house Catherine remarked — 'He sings that same thing at every festival, and every time he sings it louder.'

'And better,' said Amber, for though Mr. Mallow amused her, she did not like Catherine's bitter humour.

'And every time he sings it he is fatter, and his dream more impossible,' finished Catherine.

She was looking even more attractive than she had hoped. The dress was one of those that for some unknown reason endow the wearer with new mysterious beauty. Jasper thought she was like a gold-encrusted, richly jewelled saint in a niche in some dim cathedral. She had seemed (as she intended) much more like a bride than the bride, much more full of charm and tenderness and delicate femininity. Her figure had a slender grace that made Amber's mean and gave the bride a kind of brawny truculence. The lurid colours of the East window, which represented Death and Hell with gloomy realism, were powerless to sadden her cowslip-tinted gown, but they fell on the bride's white dress in wan, forlorn, and gloomy purples, and as the mid-day sun shafted in through the southern facet of the East window, it laid a derisive bar of corpse-like blue across her hot, red face and on her hand, stretched out to receive the ring. Jasper thought: 'How lovely my dear is! How sweet! The devotion of a life, of a whole life, is not enough.'

Catherine thought: 'What a cow-like creature Ruby is! She'll give herself such airs, being a bride. She shall not.' The white teeth snapped.

Peter thought, 'Marigold would look nice in a veil — all that yellow hair — I'll try and get hold of Ruby's veil and put it on Marigold for fun.'

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Ruby thought, 'Ernest's hand is too hot, and I wish he wasn't so stout.'

Ernest thought, 'She must learn not to pant. I must tell her about it this evening. Still, she has a well developed figure. That is good. She has a better figure than Amber or Catherine.' He was able to say with truth and placidity, 'With my body I thee worship.' Fortunately the wedding service says nothing about the love of the soul.

The tremendous wedding breakfast, with its mountains of flesh, its rows of little corpses of various sizes — turkey, goose, duck, chicken, pheasant — all tastefully laid out by Mrs. Gosling; its rather solid cake and its rather hollow gaiety; its health-drinking, with Solomon's heavy mirth, the Rector's cultured compliments, Ernest's fulminating eloquence and Jasper's shy and flowery little speech to which nobody listened, was not over till well on in the afternoon.

The party separated for a short time before tea, and Peter took his opportunity to fling the veil over Marigold. Ernest also took his opportunity to give Ruby his caution as to panting. Jasper decided that the moment had come for the presentation to Catherine of the wreath of yellow jessamine that he had persuaded Marigold to make for him. He sought for Marigold.

'Here, Master Jasper,' came a muffled voice from the dairy, and a very pink Marigold emerged, leaving Peter behind the door with the veil.

'The wreath!' whispered Jasper.

Marigold fetched it.

'Don't tell of me, Master Jasper,' she implored.

'Tell what?' said Jasper, in a lover's dream.

'He's daft about Miss Catherine,' said Marigold, to the cautiously emerging Peter.

'And I'm daft about you!' said Peter with a smacking kiss so loud that Sarah, getting tea in the kitchen, cried:

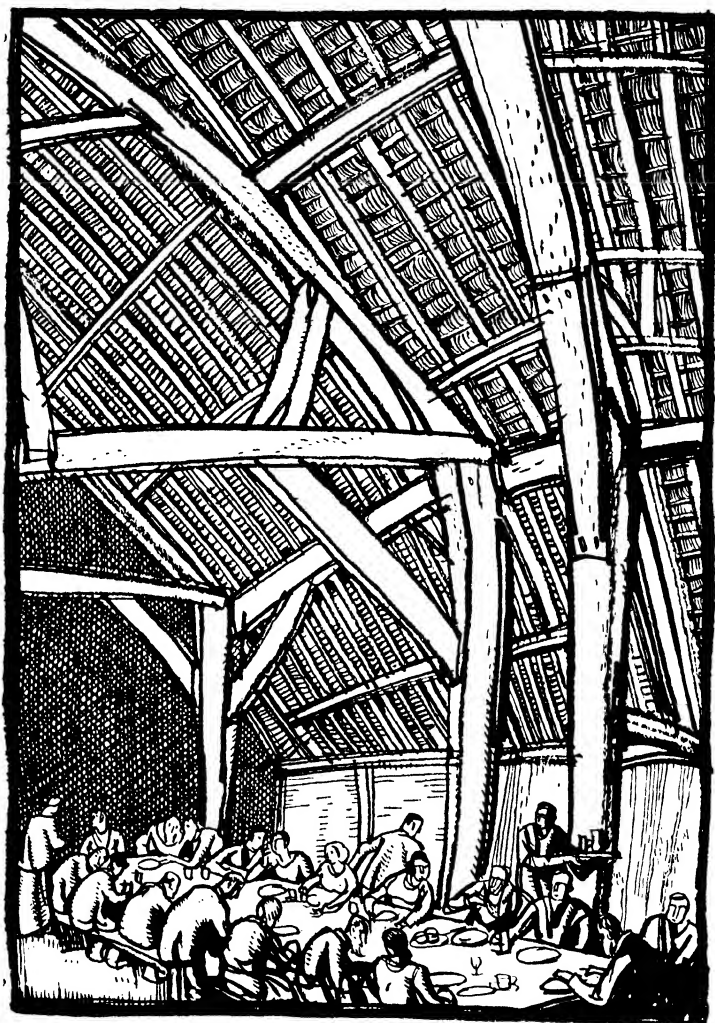
'Enoch! Enoch!'

But hearing that Enoch was not present, she subsided. The whole world might give smacking kisses to all and sundry if Sarah's 'intended' was not among them.

The day wore on. Tea was over. The villagers' knife and fork tea in the barn was over, and the dining-room clear for the dance. Ruby, trying not to pant, sat expectant by her mother awaiting the guests.

First came Mr. Arkinstall, followed by his family in Indian file.

Mr. Arkinstall taught Peter and Jasper to farm, Solomon to keep accounts, and the Rector to manage the parish. He was Solomon's



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fellow-warden. He had a broad pale face, drooping moustaches, which Catherine said gave him a Chinese look, and a sniggering laugh. He also had a gift for devious conversation which concealed undeviating views. He had proved undeviating about his daughter's engagement. Alice had been engaged to the new organist for fourteen years. He was still the new organist; no one was considered even a moderately old resident at Dormy unless he had lived there sixty years. When Charles Dank was really new, being a florid young man of twenty, he had 'asked for' quiet Alice Arkinstall. Mr. Arkinstall had immediately forbidden it, with devious reasoning. Charles, on weekdays, was clerk to the solitary lawyer at the Keep. But as no one ever went to law there (not because they did not quarrel, but because they were economical) there was not very much for the lawyer, and there was very little indeed for the clerk. Mr. Arkinstall said that financially the marriage was impossible; that Charles must have saved at least a hundred pounds before he would even consider it, and that, in short, he'd die before he'd hear of it. Charles' father — a very much more scarlet exaggeration of Charles — really did die; for when he interviewed Mr. Arkinstall, he was so exasperated by the Chinese expression, the snigger and the devious talk that his old enemy, apoplexy, overwhelmed him. All this discouraged the young couple. They only had spirit enough just to keep on being engaged. Alice collected vast quantities of doyleys and antimacassars, and became a victim to Mrs. Cantlop's tatting. Charles looked for a house. That is to say, he looked at the only house that fell vacant during the fourteen years, but it was beyond his means. Every Sunday Alice listened a little more quietly, but always with the same admiration, to his rendering of the voluntary. This became, every Sunday, a little more explosive. Alice knew exactly the places where he went wrong and where he missed a few bars, for his playing had now lost the variable elasticity of youth. As the Rector said with his accustomed tact, it had matured. Like Charles, it had gone to seed before it reached perfection. The denial of love and fulfilment and the heart's desire will cause even a genius to run to seed. Charles in maturity was more pathetic than Charles in youth, and he was most pathetic of all when he played dance music, which he was to do to-night. He was to be at the piano, Mr. Greenways had taken an evening off in order to play the flute, and Mr. Mallow was to manage the clarinet. Amber, as she looked at Alice, whose plain unlit face wore the vaguely jaded air of a woman who nears forty and has never lived, thought that Mr. Arkinstall had much to answer for. Then she reflected that Alice was happier than she was herself, for someone cared whether Alice lived or died. Certainly,

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it was a muted love. They met once a week, at church, and walked circumspectly back to the Wallows. There, as no one invited Charles to tea, they parted. Charles did his duty in both walks of life. He sat in the office all the week, and was greatly admired by the vague, infrequent old ladies who wandered in to make their wills. As one of them said, 'To see the young man's heartening. He's like a geranium in the window, makes you nigh forget the wrench of "I give and bequeath".'

Mrs. Arkinstall was a small, pebbly woman of inexhaustible (and quite necessary) obstinacy. She wore a royal blue dress immensely trimmed with braid, and a high comb in her black, polished hair. Young Philip Arkinstall followed. Philip was innocent of Chinese moustaches and devious conversation. He was direct to bluntness. But he had his father's changelessness of purpose. He went through life like a hound on the scent. What he wanted, that he would have. He would follow it until he or the desired object expired of exhaustion. His philosophy was simple. Men's respect was an aid to power; respect was won by money; money was gained by chicanery and bullying. Woman was created because a monastic life was not good for man. One special woman had been treated for him, and that woman was Catherine Velindre. He had polished hair like his mother's, a square head, a fighting mouth, and hot grey eyes. He was the only person at Dormer from whom Catherine had ever been known to hide. He sat down and stared at the door where she would come in. Jasper also stared at the door. He had presented the wreath and had seen it starrily crowning the smooth, auburn hair. His face had been quite pale with adoration, and he had snatched her hand and kissed it.

'Alice!' whispered Amber. 'If I were you I should run away with Charles.'

Alice's face became faintly rosy.

'Where?'

'Anywhere!'

'But how could we live? Where could we live?'

'Under a haystack — anywhere.'

'But the crochet, and the doyleys?'

'Burn them.'

Alice sighed. What would be the good of life without doyleys?

Amber thought, 'She doesn't love him. If she loved him she wouldn't care what sort of house she had.' If she herself loved — ah! but that would never be. She was lonelier than ever to-night. Even Ruby's infantile friendship was gone, monopolized by Ernest. The man of her dreams,

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how different from anyone here! The love of her life, how far removed from the lukewarm, the mercenary, the lustful! 'That love is made in fairyland,' she thought, 'and in fairyland it stays.'

Then she forgot her own untold story in seeing the stories of others unfold. The two men watching the door stiffened, their eyes gathered intensity. Catherine swept in. She had a boyish figure, except for her breast, which was full and feminine. The starry crown suited her. On her bare neck was Philip Arkinstall's last Christmas present, a locket and chain; on her arm was Jasper's, a forget-me-not bracelet. Her long eyes, her long fingers, her long, elaborately bound hair were instinct with provocation, self-esteem, hauteur.

'I shan't give that girl much more ether,' said Philip to himself.

'What can I do for her to show how much I love her?' thought Jasper.

Sarah, peering in from the door of the back hall, whispered to Marigold that 'if 's Catherine took on like that, she'd know trouble'. Marigold nodded with the immense wisdom of partial experience.

Jasper and Philip got up at the same moment.

'Sit here,' said Philip.

'Here!' whispered Jasper.

His eyes were a prayer. But when he turned them on young Arkinstall, they were positively ferocious.

Catherine took Jasper's chair. The two young men stood beside her.

'Law!' said Sarah. 'She's the girl for lovers. Young Arkinstall, Master Jasper, and Master Peter. Fancy three lovers!'

'Two,' said Marigold.

'Many and many 'ud be glad of one and that one as miserable and poor-spirited as you like, but 's Catherine's got three as well set up as ever I see.'

'Two,' said Marigold.

'You strike two as regular as a clock,' said Sarah.

The musicians began.

'Mr. Mallow plays like a saved soul in Paradise,' said Sarah.

Mr. Mallow was much redder, much more inflated in the cheeks than even the most rotund of cherubs. He did not spare himself. He played loudly and with regularity. Mr. Dank was explosive. Mr. Greenways was plaintive. The dancing began.

'Here's bride and bridegroom,' said Sarah. 'She looks down already. But what a couple! Well-matched they are. The good beef that's gone

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into them two bodies!' She was lost in admiration. 'Eh! There's the bell. That'll be the Rectory and a drove of visitors.'

Grandmother sat with her chin resting on the silver knob of her stick, looking at the dancers with a mingling of curiosity, displeasure and goblin mirth. She watched Mrs. Cantlop gloomily.

'I knew she'd have a new one!' she thought, watching the flamboyant rose-red bows with a wistfulness that turned to glee as the mass of silk and lace alit like a large migratory bird on the Rector's shoulder, and floated to the floor. Mrs. Cantlop was, in grandmother's phrase, roistering. Her white hair seemed in half a mind to follow the cap; her plump face was red and damp from hearty exercise; her purple dress had been more than once caught by one of Solomon's firmly-planted feet, and a long loop of the lavish tating on her petticoat trailed in her wake and threatened the venturesome Rector with headlong downfall. The good man knew it was reckless to dance with Mrs. Cantlop. The experience of years told him so. Observation of others told him so. It was like the race in the fairy tale; defeat was sure, the penalty immediate. Yet he did it, like the kind soul he was. And while he gyrated under the continually falling shadow of the cap he often wondered why it was that Mrs. Cantlop kept her eternal juvenility. He came to the conclusion that it must be because she loved so much the personality she had created — the Keturah-cum-Keturah's-father ghost on which she spent her devotion. And sometimes the Rector's conventional ideas, firmly planted by school and university — the idea that a man's first duty is to maintain his wife in physical (not psychical) comfort, that a woman is admirable in proportion to the number of her progeny — sometimes these ideas flickered in the wind of doubt. Then he was almost tempted to think Mr. Cantlop would have done better for his wife by giving her what she wanted, his own company; that Mrs. Cantlop was perhaps doing more for humanity by simply loving Keturah-cum-Keturah's-father than Mrs. Darke had done by lovelessly producing four children.

Sarah, looking through the crack of the door, eating raisins, whispered to Enoch (tip-toeing through the hall) that the Rector was dancing to his doom. But Enoch did not hear this, nor did he hear her subsequent observations.

'Mr. Ernest's the lad at the sugar-plum shop to-night! The missus makes a funeral of every randy. 's Catherine goes well!'

Catherine might have been a toy train by the way Sarah spoke. 'It was a pity I was obleeged to break that fan Mr. Philip gave her for her birthday,' she continued to Mrs. Gosling.

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'Miss Amber ought to get a young chap to lug her round,' said Mrs. Gosling, already mellow with good marriage wine. No miracle ever struck her as so truly divine as that of Cana.

'Look at Mrs. Cantlop's cap!' murmured Sarah. 'The old lady's grinding-mad with Mrs. Cantlop for getting it.'

'Where's Master Peter?' said Mrs. Gosling.

'The quieter that lad is,' replied Sarah, 'the further he's in mischief, like the cat in the cream jug.' Enoch was also silently asking that question. He was wondering why Marigold, so sweet in her new spotted muslin apron and the cap with the little streamers, had vanished and left him in the cold. Being a practical person, he was at present engaged on a tour of investigation.

'Oh!' said Sarah, suddenly, 'look 's the Rector! I knew he'd meet trouble.'

'It was to be,' said Mrs. Gosling devoutly, looking compassionately at the prone figure of the gallant Rector.

The musicians, dumbfounded at the cataclysm, wavered into silence. Grandmother laughed, and her laugh was like the sound of the winter wind in the old ivy of Dormer, like the sigh of freezing water lapping in the rustling reeds. Ernest came forward with proffered help, showing by his expression that he could have better upheld rectorial dignity. Solomon hoisted the unfortunate gentleman to his feet, ran a practised hand from knees to ankles and remarked: 'Sound!'

Mrs. Cantlop, breathlessly penitent, fanned everyone near her with a highly-scented handkerchief, and Sarah advanced with the hall clothes brush and the instinctive motherliness which awakes in all but the most hardened men and women at the sight of prostrate misfortune.

Grandmother pondered complacently on the retributive punishment of vanity. She watched the dance begin again. There they were, slowly whirling, softly lighted, gliding in a perpetual-seeming June, floating dreamily as the dandelion clocks under the dreamy suns of her youth. Blown by soft winds now! Lit by bright lamps now! But she knew, ah! she knew well, that winds grow wild at summer's end; that the night turns cold and grey; that the frost settles. And the dandelion clocks, where are they? Rotting — rotting! The hand of old age was heavy on her, and she did not hear the plaintive flute, the loud piano, the shrewdly blown clarionet. She heard only, out of the dark forest, out of her dim heart, a voice full of trouble, crying: 'It is ended!'

Perhaps it was something of this trouble reflected in her face that brought Amber across the room to sit by her. They watched the dance

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go by. Ruby passed, pink as a tulip. Catherine came by, creamy as a guelder rose. She was in the arms of young Arkinstall. Jasper's eyes, brilliant as sunny brook water, followed her as she floated by. His face, ardent and wistful when it dwelt on her, grew tense with jealousy when it turned to Philip. But his was the next dance! It seemed to Amber that they were all like creatures under a spell, like the mist of midges that dances, whirling, in a tiny vortex, beneath the humid, dusky branches of the yew. They dance, but they remain in one place. They whirl for a few moments as if enclosed in an invisible cone. Then, in the midst of their dance, they die as they have lived, beneath the humid, dusky branches of the yew. So at Dormer they danced, as it were, in prison. They were like the companies of knights and ladies who wandered of old into the airless halls of enchantment, and drinking night-shade wine, and hearing a music full of poppies, drowsed into an everlasting motion more deathly than death. There was just this quality of airlessness about the Dormer revels. Around them, below, above, like the invisible air about the midges, pressed the faces of their ancestors — earth-pale, unassuaged, as must be the ghosts of the unhappy; merciless as must be the unperceptive mind. They had lived by the laws of others. They had danced in the slumberous prison of tradition. They would enforce these things. In the dusky corners of the ceiling ashen faces seemed to linger; beyond the dividing doorway, from the twilight gloom of the drawing-room, mournful eyes seemed to peer; through every note of the music there seemed to murmur voices of denial. Like bees on an interloper, they pressed in on the small picture of life, crowding silently, ceaselessly, till the very air seemed ready to crack. Ruled by the dead, held by the dead in eternal copyhold, filled by the dead until there was no room for the living, the house seemed to have gone mad with its own antiquity, and antiquity is predatory.

Suddenly grandmother spoke, muttering to herself, and Amber's curious vision faded.

'All young,' said grandmother, 'all froward, and all damned!'

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Mrs. Gosling brooded over cooking ducks, and Enoch brooded over Marigold. Where was she?

'Enoch, you look a dream!' said Sarah, coming in.

Enoch wore a discarded coat of Solomon's, something between covert and frock, and a coloured waistcoat and a pair of check trousers (once belonging to Mr. Gosling, who had been a publican). To crown all, Marigold had tied round his neck (oh, the rapture of that tying!) one of her own blue ribbons.

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'Mumchancing again!' cried Sarah, irate that her homage was ignored. 'When the angel Gabriel calls out the name of Enoch, I believe you'll mumchance and lose your turn for Paradise!' But Enoch was gone.

He wandered along the stone passage until he came to the dairy, a id at the dairy door, in the shadows, he stopped, stricken and forlorn.

For there, in the damp, sweet-smelling place, at the far end, light :d by a flickering candle, he saw two graceful shadows dancing along the whitewashed wall, and one shadow had a cap with little streamers. They did not care for the music of flute or violin, for they heard the voice of youth singing as he swayed in the apple-tree — the tree laden with rasy fruit, where Eve gathered — and his song came thrilling to them across the pans of faintly crinkled cream, and made the rough dairy floor as smooth as glass.

'Eh, Master Peter! Master Peter!' whispered Enoch. His hands shook; his legs trembled as he turned and stole away. Tears were on his face as he came back to the kitchen and sat down heavily. He must think — and thinking was strange to him.

'What rainin'?' asked Sarah, seeing his wet face.

'Ah! Rainin' sore,' said Enoch.

But Sarah, going to the door, said:

'Why, it's fine as May! A lover's night if ever! You're mooning, Enoch.'

A lover's night — a lover's night! Ah! but it was for other lovers, not for him, not for him.

In the dining-room, Mrs. Darke still looked on like a queen watching the revels of an alien race. Grandmother still frowned at Mrs. Cantlop, and Mrs. Cantlop still danced. Catherine still gave her eyes to Philip Arkinstall, her thoughts to Peter's whereabouts and her errands to Jasper.

'Cathy! Cathy!' said Jasper, at the end of a dance. 'Mine's the next.'

'Did you find out where Peter was?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'I can't give him away, Cathy.'

'Very well, I shall use your dance to find out.'

She went away. Returning with a gleam in her eyes, she whispered to grandmother.

'Cheesecakes in the dairy!'

Now if there was a thing grandmother liked, it was cheesecakes.

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Slipping off into the next dance, Catherine watched her departure with satisfaction.

Amber went across to Jasper.

'I suppose you wouldn't dance with me, dear?'

'You aren't much good at it, are you?' said Jasper, sullen with misery.

Amber sighed, feeling that tragic sense of her own incompetence which is peculiarly bitter when the desire to help is strong.

They sank into depression.

In the dairy the dance went on with giggling and laughter. But upon the laughter and the dance and the fluting of youth broke suddenly, like the sound of doom, Mrs. Velindre's voice.

'Grandson!' said Mrs. Velindre; and the two culprits were stricken into stillness.

'Grandson, how dare you dance with a servant! Woman — go!'

Marigold went, and as she went grandmother's voice followed her.

'The abomination and the mouse!' said Mrs. Velindre, and she hobbled away, leaving Peter still speechless with astonishment. For why, in the name of all things malevolent, should grandmother have come to the dairy — a place to which she hardly came twice a year?

'Now there'll be the devil of a row!' he thought with irritation. 'And all about nothing!'

As a matter of fact, neither he nor Marigold had had the slightest thought of harm. Grandmother's stick came tapping across amid the dancers. Catherine's long eyes turned towards her over Philip Arkinstall's shoulder, watched her go up to Mrs. Darke, watched the two go away together. She would teach Peter to ignore her, Catherine Velindre, for a servant! She would teach Marigold to aspire where she, Catherine, might have set her eyes! She laughed softly.

'Stupid, people are!' she said.

'Damn stupid!' said Philip.

He thought, 'She's scheming again. Well, let her scheme! Meanwhile, I bide my time.'

In his thoughts he knew what he would do. He knew Catherine better than she ever dreamt. He knew her schemes, her determination never to marry him. He knew her brain was worth ten of his, and that she was powerful because she had no weak spot of love for any one. He knew that she used him only as a rod to bring Jasper to his senses. Very well. He would take the only course by which he could outwit her. He would bide his time, and he would compromise her.

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'They never see where they are being led,' said Catherine, who was still simple enough to take a transparent delight in her own schemes.

'No,' said Philip.

'Blind as bats!'

'All but you, Cathy. You see everything.' He permitted himself to laugh, and the laugh partook of his father's.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARIGOLD'S WARNING

CATHERINE knocked at Mrs. Darke's door. There was an appreciable silence, then a curt, 'Come in.' Mrs. Darke's room was large, tidy and cold. It was tidy with the inhuman neatness of an hotel bedroom and a conventional mind, a neatness that came from emptiness. A woman's life history is generally written in her room. But in Mrs. Darke's room nothing was written. All the world might have come and peered in without learning a single thing about her. There was nothing to show that she had a husband or children — no mementoes, no gifts from Solomon — as a matter of fact, Solomon's gifts were infrequent. This was not from meanness, but because on his rare visits to the Keep there were always cartridges and dog biscuits and such things to buy. There was no picture of him either as a young man or a middle-aged one. Perhaps this did not matter very much, for Solomon's soul at the age of twenty had been exactly the same as Solomon's soul aged sixty, therefore no particular interest could attach to his face. His mother, in a fit of family pride, had once suggested his having his portrait done like the Squire of the next parish, in hunting pink. Mrs. Darke, caught between the precipice of a

direct statement on one hand and the whirlpool of needless expense on the other, chose the precipice, and said: 'However expensive it was, it would still be only Solomon, and I have Solomon.'

There were none of those reassuring little indulgences and luxuries which, by proclaiming a person to be something of a sybarite, generally give security of a certain dependableness. From the sybarite you are more sure of mercy than from the ascetic; because he is a creature of the emotions, and desiring passionately the good things of life, he can guess the tragedy of being without them.

The furniture was severe and gloomy, for Solomon's mother, to whom the room had belonged, held Calvinistic views, and Mrs. Darke had not troubled to alter it. She went in and out like a stranger, leaving no impress on anything in the house, for the desire for artistic self-expression comes of a healthy individualism and not from the disease of egotism, which is stunted development. Mrs. Darke was quite unindividual. She was a part of her class and creed, just as a bit of meteorological stone is part of a sun or a star. But it will never be a world unless it has movement. Nor would Mrs. Darke ever be an individual, because she had no living impulses. Her longing to be bowed down to, her greed of power, were also the results of this lack of growth. It was as if, very far away in the mists of the subconscious self, she heard a voice cry that she did not exist, never had existed, and in fear of being nothing had resolved to seem to be everything. The outer form was all in all to her. She was one of those for whom ceremonial is made. She had always done her duty by her husband and children. She had seen to it that Solomon's winter coat was put away with pepper in the summer, and that his frayed cuffs were mended by Marigold or her predecessors. Her offspring had all suffered vaccination, baptism, dentistry, and confirmation at the correct times. She ruled Solomon's house in the orthodox manner. She had a gift for autocratic rule, and was a staunch believer in matriarchy. She disliked her own mother, who bored her, but she would never confess it even to herself. She had a certain dour loyalty to the dour laws she obeyed. That she did not love Mrs. Velindre was not astonishing, for in nothing but physical fact was that lady her mother. For the real mother is, first, a passionate lover of her children, recklessly spending herself in the manner of all lovers. The idea of either Mrs. Velindre or her daughter in the guise of a reckless lover had in it more of mirth than conviction. They had somehow missed the gift, for it does not go inalienably with the production of offspring, and it is sometimes found in strange places — in the eyes of spinsters or invalids, in the smile of some whom the world despises.

'Well, what is it now?' asked Mrs. Darke, as Catherine entered with her usual circumspect softness. If any one had ever wanted to confide in Rachel Darke, they must have found it an uphill road. She looked at Catherine now very much as a squire looks at a poacher. But Catherine was quite undismayed. Like a smoothly polished statue, she was impervious to rough weather.

'Forgive me for intruding, dear Aunt,' she said amiably, looking round for a comfortable chair. Not finding one, she lay down on the bed, for she liked to be as comfortable as possible. This was the first time for some years that she had interviewed her aunt in this room, but she had remembered the cold and had put on her winter coat. She lay very blandly on the ancestral birth and death bed, her fur collar well up, setting off her rich hair.

Mrs. Darke looked more than ever like a squire contemplating a poacher. She paced to and fro, hands locked, tormenting each other. So might a lady abbess walk, as she pondered on the penance of an impenitent nun. A lady abbess was what Mrs. Darke should have been, since power was what she thirsted after — power for its own sake, not necessarily over many, but completely over a few. Having been allowed no power in her youth, even over herself, no responsibility even for her own actions (for she had been dominated by Mrs. Velindre and family opinion), the desire had grown into a lust. To tyrannize was metheglin to her, and things had come to such a pass that she had the habitual drunkard's mad and cunning craving, only what she wanted was the human soul. On that she fed, on that she gloated as any cannibal might. If it fled from her, she clutched at it; if it escaped, she used all her finesse to catch it again; having caught it, she tore it in bitter, silent rage. Catherine was aware of this idiosyncrasy. She understood her aunt (for beneath their respective manners of chillness and suavity they were both savages) and she wielded a peculiar power over her by pretending to offer herself as an unconscious sacrifice, like a plump, gay-feathered bird. Innumerable times did Mrs. Darke imagine that she had sent Catherine quivering with mental pain to spend a night in tears, and on all those occasions Catherine had nestled into bed very happily, murmuring, as she opened her favourite devotional book, 'Fooled again, dear Aunt!'

'Are you ill?' inquired Mrs. Darke, and her eye told that she would give short shrift to malingering.

'Never better, Aunt Rachel.'

'Who have you quarrelled with?'

'I never quarrel, dear Aunt.'

MARIGOLD'S WARNING

'Are you in debt?'

'Solvent, Auntie.'

'Then why come to me?'

'For all you know, Aunt Rachel, I may want to see more of you.'

Mrs. Darke laughed — a short and cutting laugh. Who had ever wanted to see more of her, anything of her? Certainly not Solomon, who in his loud and hearty way ignored her existence whenever it was possible. Not her mother, for she was in the position of abdicating monarch, and in an absolute monarchy that is an unpleasant position. She mingled, in her treatment of her daughter, pathetic echoes of autocracy with equally pathetic shivers of fear. When Mrs. Velindre irritated her, Mrs. Darke said, in her incisive voice:

'I shall lock you up!'

To grandmother, who loved to hobble about with her tall, knobbed stick, and peer into every one's affairs, going softly in list shoes, this threat had a creeping horror. She avoided her daughter, whenever she could. For each member of the family Mrs. Darke had an especial rod, except perhaps for Sarah. Sarah feared nothing, and had the courage of her convictions. There were times when she even lingered near Mrs. Darke, 'singing for trouble', as Mrs. Gosling said, like one queen wasp meeting another. On one such memorable day Sarah broke a kitchen cup, thus laying herself open to her mistress's icy satire. Mrs. Darke had concluded her speech with:

'I think, as the old Derby jug is never in your hands but once a year, it may outlast you if you die soon.'

Whereupon Sarah, in scarlet wrath, had seized the heirloom with a shriek of: 'Outlast me, will you?' and had dashed it on the flags. Strangely enough, she did not get notice for this. After all, who else would have done so much work in so short a time for so little money? Later, dabbing bits of it on to her 'world', she had been shamed into partial repentance by Enoch's reproachful gaze.

'Well, Aunt,' said Catherine, curling herself more comfortably, 'it's about Mrs. Gosling's girl.'

She never called Marigold by her name, thinking it foolish and knowing Marigold to be proud of it.

Mrs. Darke started. So Catherine knew! The last person who should have known.

'What about her?'

'Granny told me.'

'I shall lock her up!' muttered Mrs. Darke. 'Told you she's in trouble?'

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

she asked Catherine, her mouth sneering, for she found these unruly emotions of youth contemptible.

'Yes. It's very sad, Aunt.'

'Did she name the man?'

'Aha! Aha!' thought Catherine. 'You didn't want me to know!' Aloud she said: 'I am sorry to say she did.'

If Mrs. Darke cared for any one it was Peter. He was superficially very like herself. She had planned his marriage with Catherine years ago. Catherine would live here under her rule, produce children, and uphold with her money the falling fortunes of Dormer. The way in which her controlled rage shook her was horrible to witness. Catherine watched, amused. Mrs. Darke was whelmed in class hatred — a futility of the human race even more devastating than the foolishness of national hatred. It was well for herself and for Marigold that the girl was not in the room at the moment. Mrs. Darke tore her handkerchief in two. Catherine winced, disliking the noise. Then, seeing that it was going to happen again, she said: 'Dear Aunt?'

'Well?'

'What will Peter do?'

'It's a mistake — a mistake. It must be Jasper.'

'I know it isn't Jasper.'

'How?'

'Jasper has proposed to me.'

Mrs. Darke's face was again distorted. The one son wouldn't marry Catherine, and must. The other son must not, and would.

'Did you refuse him?'

'Of course, Aunt. How could I marry an infidel?' This at least was hopeful.

'Shall you send the girl away?'

'Shall I? Shall I? She will go packing at once. Prostitute that she is!'

'Oh, dear Aunt!'

'Nonsense. You are not so innocent as all that, Catherine.'

'And will Peter go also?'

'He will not. He will stay here as arranged. His father and Ernest are talking to him.'

Catherine shook with silent laughter. She could so well imagine the conversation.

'Will Peter marry her?'

'Marry her? I'd sooner see him dead.'

'Will he marry some one else?'

MARIGOLD'S WARNING

'Of course. The family must go on.'

A curious look tenanted Catherine's eyes for a moment. It had in it both anger and fear. At the back of her mind was always a lurking intuition that she was doomed to carry on some man's family. She emphatically did not want to. She wanted to be a queen in her own right, to rule men, to enslave, but never to be enslaved.

'Suppose the girl you have thought of won't take Peter at second-hand? Who is the girl, Auntie? You always have plans. I'm sure you have decided.'

Mrs. Darke walked across the room flinging over her shoulder:

'That is not your affair!'

'I think it is,' said Catherine. 'Behold the lamb for the burnt offering.'

Once more Mrs. Darke's handkerchief suffered. Things were going worse and worse. She had not dreamed that Catherine guessed. And now she had not only guessed, she had found out about Marigold. Mrs. Darke almost raved.

Catherine enjoyed the upper hand for a while. Then she administered balm.

'If the girl went away — right away for good, and Peter was sorry, and turned from this low affection to a higher — well, it's a woman's duty to forgive.'

'He's about as good as you'll get,' muttered Mrs. Darke.

'A woman should help him to turn the new page and choose the new road.'

Mrs. Darke's usually expressionless face, winter-pale and at the same time volcanic, expressed relief. She had planned this match, and her plans were her career.

But Catherine knew, in her heart, that she never would marry Peter, never forgive him. She would bring pressure to bear on Jasper, bend him to her will, marry him.

'Have you interviewed the girl, Aunt?'

'Not yet.'

'Could you send for her now?'

Mrs. Darke, for once, was obliged to submit. She would rather have seen Marigold alone, but she rang the bell.

'House afire, mum?' queried Sarah, looking in. She wished to emphasize the undesirability and unusualness of ringing bedroom bells.

Mrs. Darke felt that the house *was* afire.

'Send Mrs. Gosling's girl up,' she said.

'Almighty God take pity on 'er,' said Sarah devoutly, as she went downstairs.

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

Marigold stood in the doorway — a washed-out Marigold with crumpled apron and dejected little streamers. She was dazed by the storm that had descended on her. For the last two hours her mother had scolded, Sarah had looked askance, Rectory-Lucy had sniffed, even Enoch had been silent. Master Peter had 'caught a holt of her' and pranced across the dairy, and she hadn't thought any harm. She had cried till she thought she could cry no more.

'That's warning!' said Sarah when the bell rang, and sure enough it was. She stood shaking, wondering what they all thought she had done.

'Take a week's notice!' said Mrs. Darke.

'Yes'm, thank you.'

Marigold had something of her mother's apologetic manner.

'Go and hide your head away from respectable people.'

'Please'm, I partly think I'm respectable.'

'Don't bandy words, you bad woman! You may be thankful to get off so lightly.'

Marigold tried to avoid Catherine's pitiless eyes.

'Why do you tremble if you have not done wrong?' said Catherine.

It was a hopeless question. It has been a hopeless question to the simple for many a long year. The sensitive and the timid always do tremble, being in the right, and by so doing put themselves in the wrong. Being accused of evil, they are crushed, and immediately this is taken for guilt.

'How long have you cohabited with my son?' asked Mrs. Darke in a terrible voice, regardless of Catherine's expostulation.

'I don't rightly understand, mum!' said Marigold.

'How long is it since you slept with my son first?'

Marigold was suddenly faint, for all her robustness. Her face was scarlet, pulses beat all over her. She swayed as she stood and hid her face in her hands.

'Ah! that's clear to you, is it?' said Mrs. Darke; 'that finds the weak spot.'

'The spot — the spot! Wash out the spot of sin!' said grandmother, entering.

'Answer, girl!' said Mrs. Darke.

'Yes, answer!' said Catherine, curious. Life interested her; so did Peter.

'Answer! Answer!' piped grandmother.

But Marigold could find no voice. To think that of her! And she never so much as let a man kiss her — not even Enoch under the mistletoe. Only Master Peter had kissed her that once unbeknown.

'She daren't answer!' was the verdict.

MARIGOLD'S WARNING

Marigold raised her head, and out of the confusion and terror looked pride, the simple pride of a country girl to whom her good name is all.

'I didn't never do such a thing,' she said on a shocked sob. 'Master Peter wouldn't lower 'isself to ask it, nor me to say yes to it.'

They laughed. They did not believe her. Rectory-Lucy did not either, nor her mother. She began to cry again.

'If you're a respectable girl, why do you cry?' inquired Catherine.

'Weeping and gnashing of teeth! Ye-u'll go to hell!' said grandmother.

'I'll goo away from this place!' said Marigold, with a flash of spirit. 'And I won't never come back. I'll goo to my auntie!'

'I wish her joy!' said Catherine.

'And when the brat's born, don't bring it here,' said Mrs. Darke. 'Take it to the workhouse with it!'

'There wunna never be no brat, and there inna no wrong, and the e wunna — never, never!' cried Marigold again. 'And what for you shoud all think of me as never done you no wrong —' she sobbed. 'Ask Master Peter!' she cried suddenly. Again the three laughed.

Ask Peter! How indecent! How like a common girl to suggest it! Besides, of course, Peter would deny it, like any other young man.

'Do not dare to speak my son's name!' said Mrs. Darke. 'We know the truth. Be grateful I don't send you off to-night. It is not for your sake I keep up appearances but for the family's. Your wages are here. Take them and go.'

'I dunna want 'em, mum.'

'The stick! The stick!' said grandmother. 'In the old days it would have been the stick across your shoulders!'

Marigold turned to go. Her plump figure, supple and strong, annoyed Mrs. Darke by its independence even in the midst of confusion.

'Your dress is tight already!' she said. 'You know what that means!'

Catherine was horrified. She had never thought her aunt could be so coarse. In fact, Mrs. Darke never was, but in her rage and hate she had forgotten herself. Catherine went out of the room in expostulatory silence, brushing past Marigold in pale, derisive purity.

Marigold, as she went downstairs, came slowly and by gradual steps to the conclusion that being good did not pay. And a faint, fluttering regret was born in the depths of her heart — regret that she had suffered the penalty without having tasted one crumb of the joy.

Peter, in the deserted dancing room, was feeling much the same thing. There sat his father and Ernest, the judges. There stood he, the culprit.

'Here's a splotter,' said Solomon.

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

'Pity — pity!' said Ernest.

'What have you got to say for yourself?' asked Solomon.

'Nothing,' replied his son.

'An illicit connection with one of the servants! I'm damned!' said Solomon.

'A hallowed love — a sacred love,' continued Ernest. 'Ah! how different from this!'

'I don't love anybody!' said Peter.

'Then there is no excuse.'

'There's no need of excuse; I've done nothing.'

'Lies — lies! I know young men!' Solomon spoke with a kind of gruff tolerance.

'The human heart is desperately wicked,' added Ernest. 'All we like sheep —'

'I tell you I've done nothing. I've not gone astray so far. But I will! I will!' Peter added.

'A love that society can countenance,' Ernest remarked, 'is safe because it is sanctioned, and sanctioned because it is safe.'

'You make my head ache,' said Peter.

'Give the girl up,' ordered Solomon.

'I can't.'

'Don't say "can't" to me!'

'I can't give up what I haven't got.'

'If Catherine knew, she wouldn't marry you.'

Peter laughed.

'She needn't. I don't want her. Pale thing!'

'If she knew you had danced with a servant in the dairy —'

'I don't care who knows. There was no harm.'

'If there'd been no harm, would you have wanted to dance?' said Solomon.

'Well, I'll go to bed, Father. It's no good arguing. Good-night.'

He was gone, a tumult of new ideas and personalized emotions in his mind. As he and Jasper were going to bed, he said:

'Marigold's pretty, isn't she?'

'Passable,' said Jasper with a yawn.

'If you were me, should you marry Catherine?'

Jasper sat up in bed with a bounce.

'If you say that again I'll knock your head off,' he remarked.

Peter sighed. Every one was very combative to-day. But as he fell asleep, he thought again of Marigold. Decidedly she was pretty, very



NORMAN HEDDLE

(MACECAH)

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sweet to kiss. And he had only kissed her once! They all blamed him. Very well. He would have a few more — a good many more.

The house settled down. The night sounds began. Death-watches, creakings of furniture, the ticking of clocks like the falling of water-drops.

Suddenly in the comparative silence a door opened and a figure rushed across the landing to Amber's room. But the door was locked. Another figure, stout and clad in pyjamas, followed.

'I'm going to Amber!' said a voice, low but determined.

'You shall not make me look ridiculous,' said another voice, low but very angry.

Another door opened silently, to the width of an inch.

'I don't like being married. I don't like you,' said the first voice.

The second voice tried persuasion.

'All that marriage means — companionship, love, children.'

'I hate children!'

'A little replica of me!'

At that the first voice dissolved in laughter. A third door opened.

'What is this noise!' said Mrs. Darke. She stood there in a bar of moon-light in a grey dressing-gown, grey of hair and face. And it seemed as if a mental greyness gave a deeper tone to all the rest.

'She is hysterical, hysterical,' said Ernest. 'We must be patient.'

He stood there in his new pyjama suit, dignified and with a consciousness of being in the right.

'Patient!' said Mrs. Darke, who had no more patience after the troubles of the day. 'Don't be a fool, Ernest. Loose that door, Ruby, and go back to your room. You have made the bargain. You must keep it.'

'I won't! I won't! He looks so fat in pyjamas!' answered Ruby in a sibilant and infuriated whisper.

Catherine, watching through her inch-wide opening, shook with laughter at the scene.

As Mrs. Darke and Ernest, taking each an arm, propelled Ruby across the landing, she gently shut her door, chronicling the scene in her mind as a useful rod for Ernest in the future.

The long day was done. The house watched over its sleeping children, careless, it seemed, as to whether they dreamed happily or sadly. If the house stood, what mattered the single soul? Let Ruby be bound to a hated bargain, let Marigold be cast out, Peter marry without love, Jasper be broken in spirit, Amber lonely, and the rest malformed in soul. What matter, if the house went on? The house must go on, just as it was, just as it had been for so long. It would go on, surely, for ever. It lay under the

MARIGOLD'S WARNING

dim forest, regarding the flashing stars with its many eyes. And all around it through the night the forest whispered, muttered, fir and spruce and pine with their dark creative music, and with harsher voices the bare trees that had forgotten leaves with summer. They sang, and the lipping ivy on the house sang with them, of things that had been before the earliest wattle hut. They sang of lichens and mosses and elm samaras and rosy seed of pines already preparing for the day when Dormer should be taken back into the earth, curtained in green. For nothing that is built by man for the subjugation of the single soul can stand.



CHAPTER TWELVE

THE GROTTO

ON the day after the wedding Catherine went to tea at the Rectory. She liked to look her best, even for a middle-aged man and woman, which was one of her pleasanter qualities. Sometimes also, young Arkinstall would vault over a stile as she came home, and walk with her. She despised him, but he enlivened the tedium of a walk. To Catherine a lonely walk was intolerable. She had no kinship with the wild, and if there was one thing she disliked more than walking alone, it was walking with Amber, for Amber insisted on talking about trees and birds.

To-day Catherine did not, as usual, ask Marigold to wave her hair. She went down to Sarah in the kitchen. Marigold knew how great a slight this was, for she knew Catherine disliked Sarah.

'Aunt,' said Catherine before she started, 'they will wonder at the Rectory what the fuss was about. Can I tell them?'

'Tell that hurdy-gurdy of a woman! Not a word!'

Catherine smiled. She liked to 'draw' her aunt. Then she departed, looking her best. And her best, as poor Jasper knew, was very good indeed. Mrs. Darke went to call on Mrs. Arkinstall in order to comfort herself for the tiresomeness of her married daughter by reminding Mrs. Arkinstall that her daughter was still unmarried. An unhappy, sullen Ruby had been taken for a drive by a hurt and dignified Ernest.

THE GROTTO

Marigold sat in the school-room, where she sewed every afternoon, and the November sun lingered on her bright head. As she sewed, she cried, and as she cried, she pricked her finger, so that the shirt she was mending was bedewed with little points of red. Everything was very quiet. Grandmother was in the dining-room asleep, and Amber in her own room reading. Sarah was clearing up the kitchen and singing: 'There is a fountain . . .'

Marigold sewed and sobbed, for she had 'warning' to go in a week, and her heart was here.

Suddenly the French window was opened cautiously, and in walked Peter.

'I knew you'd be crying,' he said. 'They told me — the governor told me — you were going. So I just walked off from the Wallows to see you. I'm damned sorry, Marigold.'

'Oh, Master Peter, I misdoubt some one'll come!'

'They're all safe. Marigold?'

'Master Peter?'

'Since they started on me, talking, and that, I've thought about you a lot. I didn't before.'

'No, Master Peter.'

'You're pretty when you cry. Ruby looks like a great pæony.'

'Oh! Master Peter!'

'Don't "Master Peter" me! Say Peter!'

'I couldna! No, never could I.'

'You must.'

He knelt in front of her and took away the sewing.

'What's this you're doing?'

'The cuffs on your blue and white shirt, Master —'

He put a hand on her mouth.

'Peter! The last I'll mend for you.' She sobbed.

'Do you love me, Marigold? Say "Yes, Peter"!' He had both hands now. The pretty head drooped.

Peter kissed her. He was not in love with her, but his father's talk of an illicit connection and Ernest's talk of unholy love had kindled in him a curiosity and awakened in him a kind of emotionless and almost impersonal passion. He was aroused and inspired by their groundless suspicions to make the suspicions true.

'Say "I love you, Peter"!'!

With trembling lips and swimming blue eyes she said it.

In the midst of his kisses she suddenly stiffened.

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

'Hushee! Hushee! There was a door slammed. You mun goo.'

Her voice was like a pigeon's.

'Meet me in the wood when you've washed up tea!' said Peter.

He was gone, but by the entrance to the woods he was waiting for her in the evening, and every evening until her last. In the last sweet moment of the last sweet hour, when Sarah could be heard down by the gun-dog's kennel crying, 'Marigol! Marigol!' Peter spoke with the cruelty that can dwell with passion (for in the last week he had learnt a young passion, not the love-rayed gift of the great gods, but the woodland passion of a faun).

'You are going to-morrow,' he said.

'To-morrowday! Oh, I wish I met be dead afore to-morrowday!' cried Marigold suddenly, in a voice broken with love. 'If it 'ud thunder now, and a bolt fa-al, or a wind come out o' the sky, and this wold yew-tree fa-al!'

'Silly! What d'you want to die for? I don't want to die.'

'Master Peter! Oh, my darlin', what'n you done to be more than the world an' all?'

'I duano!' Peter laughed shortly and rather shyly.

'I'd as lief be under the daisies if I canna bide in Dormer valley! And that new girl mindin' your things and all!'

She cried again heartbrokenly.

'Well, you've got to go, so there's an end,' said Peter. 'But perhaps I'll come and see you.'

The sun came out in Marigold's face.

'And if you're sorry to leave me, and if you're as fond of me as you say—'

'What, Master Peter?'

'You won't say good-bye now.'

'Oh, but I mun—I'm agoing at five and it's prayers after supper and then bed—and there's Sarah hollering agen.'

Peter whispered.

'Oh, I couldna! Not in the black o' night! Not all up to the grotto!'

'Good-bye, then.'

'Oh, no, no!'

'Then come! I'll make a fire.'

'What'd Sarah and Rectory-Lucy say?'

'They won't know. Besides, they all thought harm of us when there wasn't any harm. Let's give 'em something to cry for.'

'Oh, Master Peter, the things you say!'

THE GROTTTO

'You and me, Marigold, you and me in the grotto as if it was our house!' He conjured a picture of terror and fascination.

'P'raps you'll never see me again after to-morrow.'

'Dunna say that, oh, dunna! There's Sarah all of a hoost, skriking I mun goo.'

'Come then, as soon as Sarah's asleep. Say!'

'Maybe I wunna,' said Marigold, turning to run down the wood, 'a id maybe I 'ool.'

Going to bed in Sarah's scintillating attic, Marigold felt lost in the thought of to-morrow. Sarah eyed her tears in no unfriendly spirit. Before, Marigold had been a powerful and permanent rival. Now, since the fateful hour of the dance, she was obliterated. Her 'intended' was now hers only. She always spoke of Enoch as her intended, thus attaining that to which fine literature aspires — the expression of the precise truth. When asked whether she was Enoch's intended also, she replied: 'Oh, he treasures up his dark designs!' Now all was well. Mere resistance on the part of Enoch was, she felt, unimportant. In a lavish mood she had lighted two tallow dips, and in their wavering light she surveyed her room with complaisance. It was a scene of almost barbaric splendour. The multi-tinted crockery-work glittered savagely; the patchwork quilt was bewildering in its variety; the scarlet rug, made from the scraps of numerous flannel petticoats, defied the pink glazed calico that draped the dressing-table. A good room, Sarah felt, and good ornaments, very suitable for setting up house.

Marigold sat with her head leaning against the white-washed wall beneath a huge text worked in wool. She was feeling the burden of the fact that, when one is very miserable, somebody always lights two tallow dips.

'Ah, you cry!' said Sarah. 'It'll do you good. So you're away to your auntie's. Well, 's Catherine'll be glad. If Sarah Jowel's got eyes, 's Catherine's had more to do with it than she'd care to say. She gets to what she wants cross-lonkards, does 's Catherine, like a bird to crumbs.'

'Somebody's made right wrong,' sobbed Marigold. 'I wish I was dead.'

'Ah! I'm that-a-way myself, times,' said Sarah. 'Love's so lungeous! It churns up your innards summat cruel!'

She began to sing in her resounding voice, 'There is a fountain filled with blood.' This chirurgic hymn was a favourite of hers.

Marigold went on crying. The lungeousness of love had become very apparent to her. Every one was angry. Miss Catherine blazed at her with eyes of haughty virtue. The old lady had a text for every meeting, and

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

did not mince her words. The mistress — Marigold shivered at the thought of Mrs. Darke's glacial regard. And the angrier they were, the more furiously did Peter make love. He snatched her hand as she went in to prayers. He waylaid her at every dim turn of the stairs. He was strange and wild. And now she had practically promised to go to the grotto. She was trepidant, jubilant; but chiefly she was afraid. When Sarah breathed deeply and the house had sunk into silence, and night had flung her purple curtain over the forest, she must steal out and meet Peter at the grotto.

'If you'd give your word to do a thing, would you do it if it wunna right according to catechism?' she asked.

'Well,' said Sarah judiciously, 'I met, if I bettered myself by it, and if it was respectable.' She was arranging the cottonwool in her ears for the night.

'When true lovers part, it's a bad day for 'em,' she said. 'Put out the candles, if you're only crying. Tears want no tallow. But if I was you, I'd come to bed, Christian. And see, Marigol', I'll give you one of those jars. No, seeing I'm sorry for you, I'll give you the pair. A bit of property's a grand medicine for all ills.' She clapped in the last piece of cotton-wool and got into bed.

Marigold also got into bed and lay there inertly. The lover, faced with parting, becomes a dumb creature beneath a heavy mallet. She listened to the rats gnawing and scurrying within the walls. They were like the unholy things that harbour in outworn forms — the petty hates, the tyrannies, the deceit and fear. The attics were alive with their stealthy goblin noise; it was as if they knew the night was theirs and that none would gainsay them. There they were, and there they would stay. Only if Dormer fell would they depart. Their shrill squeaking and quarrelling, their occasional falls when they dislodged a quantity of loose mortar, the perpetual fear that they would gnaw through into the room, kept Marigold in a fidget. At last she heard, through the half-open door, very faint, coming along the echoing passages, the voice of the dictatorial clock announcing twelve. She must go. In spite of her dread of the dark woods, of the judgment of her fellows, the sorrowful to-morrow had receded, and there flowered in the lightless room the wild rose of love's ecstasy. Sarah heard Marigold stirring, for her sleep was what she called 'a dog-sleep'. She guessed where Marigold was going, and as the faint creakings of the attic stairs were hushed, she turned over restlessly, as if to shuffle off responsibility, and murmured: 'I've got 'ool in my ears, hanna I? For all I'm supposed to know, the girl's in bed and asleep.'

Marigold, passing the door of Ernest and Ruby, wondered why it

THE GROTTA

was right for them to be together, not loving each other (for she was sure they did not care for each other), and why it was wrong for Peter and herself to be together, when they did love each other. For Marigold, in common with other lovers, quite forgot to find out whether her gift was returned. She envied the sleeping house, which was foolish of her, for sleep is only a shadow. Those who go out of the dreaming house into the forest are at least awake, however dark the forest may be.

The solid pilasters of the stone porch looked ghostly in the moonlight, and from each one, as she opened the door, sprang a rod, lying darkly on the floor of the hall. In the cold air her breath stood up, white, small and palpable, as men have imagined the soul to stand at its passing.

She went swiftly down to the bridge and along by the water, and as she went, accompanied by her vagrant shadow, another shadow, taller and less vacillating, followed under the lee of the bare woods. The black silhouettes of the lower trees lay, spectral and large, half on land and half in the water. Marigold's shadow and the shadow that followed her threaded them. The wind made a snake-like, hissing sound in all the yews of the hillside as Marigold sped upwards. As she neared the grotto, a voice, low but imperative, called her from beside the water:

'Marigold! Marigold!'

And the echoes that haunted the cup where Dormer lay took up the music of the word and played with it, sending it like a ball from slope to slope.

'Marigold — gold — gold!'

But the broken echoes were flung back with a mocking sound into the silver water, for she did not hear. Already Peter had stepped from the grotto, already she was in his arms. 'You are late!' he said crossly. Then in the sweetness of kissing her he forgave her, and they went into the grotto. A red fire of logs blazed on the rough hearth that used to warm the Dormer ladies when, in a day long gone, they spent their maiden leisure in lining the grotto with shells. On the table was such a repast as Peter deemed suitable. Marigold eyed the collation, recognizing the contents of the larder. Her breathless pallor gave way before her laughter.

'There'll be nought for dinner to-morrowday! They'll all be clemmed!'

And a peal of laughter startled the stony grotto as she saw, beside to-morrow's pudding and the ham, Mrs. Velindre's beloved quince marmalade and the potted meat without which Ernest could not breakfast. Peter shouted, tossing back his head with his wild faun air, snapping his fingers. To-night the wood-god was predominant in him. It was in his

cheeks; in the straight, eager profile in which he resembled Jasper; in the wave of his hair that was flung back like a crest, as if to cool an over-hot forehead. It was in his loose-knit figure, which had, in spite of the gaucherie of youth, the grace that is given even to the clumsy by primal impulse. He had the touch of princeliness which passion, even the callowest, the crudest, gives to the young.

'Apron!' he cried. 'Cap! What do we want with them? Off with 'em! Ho! I like you better without a cap!'

He held the plait of hair, coloured like sunburnt bracken, in both hands. The logs blazed, and every pale shell flushed in the red light. Had the staid ladies, who set them one by one in place, known for what festival they built that beauty of mother-of-pearl, had they heard echoes of that laughter which now leapt with the leaping flames, maybe they would have stayed their hands. Little would be done in this life if men knew for what they built. So a great king may set forth to build a palace of black basalt for the god of war. And behold! When he has finished it, Fate says: 'This is not what I wanted. Come, you tendrilled things, you blossomy things, wreathe this basalt into beauty! Come, you white and golden doves, make a nest here, make a music here! For this is a bower for the peaceful spirit of brotherhood.'

Here was a place meant for the tame revellings of conventional ladyhood, and behold! that rough, wild thing, young passion, took possession. Marigold's head, outlined by the iridescent wall; her face, thrown into relief by the dancing light, faintly rose-tinted; her eyes, dark with present joy and future sorrow, made a picture so sweet that the last remnants of caution left Peter. He would forget that he was to marry pale Catherine and consolidate Dormer. All that would come in time. But now, here was Marigold and here was he, and the red light surged over shells of saffron, of salmon pink, of veined purple and scarlet.

Peter stooped to a great conch that was the central ornament above the fireplace, and shouted into its sounding hollow, 'Marigold!'

The confident music seemed to defy that other music without, the music that had fallen into the water.

'Oh, hushee now,' said Marigold. But she smiled, for she too refused to parley with the morrow, and who should hear them, safe in their magical house in the dim lost centre of night?

Outside, climbing with slow and heavy steps, a great knobbed stick in his hand, Enoch heard the laughter — very faint and maddening, like the provocative voice of an unkind love who had betaken herself to the submerged halls of faery.

THE GROTTO

He stood still, and the attentive trees stood about him on this side and on that, surveying him as though they questioned. His face was dark and drawn with rage, and the fierceness of a creature defrauded. That he was of so quiet a nature made this volcanic fire more terrible. So wild a fury shook his massive body, that it seemed to conjure a visible picture on the dim screen of night — a picture of two lovers dead amid broken shells and scattered fire. But even as his hand was stretched towards the door, he paused. Far down, in startled silver, out of startled mist, a cock crowed. The sound was a key that opened within his mind the great door of nature. He paused, and the trees seemed to question him. They summoned his soul, his deepest, most mysterious self, and when it came at their call they communed with it, creating with its help a better thing than the desire of killing which had grown up like a dark fungus in his mind. He had watched, knowing this hour would come. He had waited in the garden, sure that one night she would steal forth. To be up all night was nothing to him. He was always out before the light. He could not have borne to miss the intoxicating secrecy of those hours when who knows what strange things are out and about — hours haunted by inexplicable sounds, significant happenings. Those are the hours when sheep and cattle do as they list, and look upon the world with eyes different from those that humans know; for at this time they have not yet called in their souls for the day — their timid souls that must be barred in the shippon of silence, where they sleep behind eyes shuttered with sullen or wistful inexpressiveness. In dew-dark summer mornings Enoch loved to be among them as one kin to them, and at the first shrilling of the sunrise chorus, when each beast was startled (walking at ease with its soul) by its sudden shadow flung blue before it by the early ray, Enoch also went as three — his broad and sturdy body, his half-tamed soul, and his pansy-tinted shadow.

An hour less or more mattered little to him. He had meant to save Marigold from the obloquy that in the House of Dormer falls on a generous lover. He had intended to follow her and threaten them both with discovery and drag her from the very arms of passion, carry her if need be to her mother's house.

And now here he was, foiled by his own personality, tied hand and foot by his own rage. For he knew that if he put his hand on the door he would kill Peter Darke. He would strike from those black eyes the glow of triumph, trample in the pine-needles that haughty figure, that hawklike air.

He gazed round him at the multitudinous witness of his temptation, at the secret yews peering over one another with their great stooping

shoulders and their appearance of having their heads hidden. Yews are the owls of the tree-world; they have the same curious look of having drawn down their heads into their bodies. Beyond the yews he saw a dead holly, stark and pale, with arms flung up as before an inevitable, incurable horror. A little fir tree kept up a low descant, caressing with its finger-tips the side of the grotto. It was well for those within that they did not laugh at that moment. A laugh would have meant three lives. But Peter was drinking deep in the grey wells of Marigold's eyes, and no sound disturbed the night.

'Killing's allus untimely,' muttered Enoch, and it seemed to his soul that the unheard echoes were crying with a sweet chiding: 'Untimely, untimely!' But it was not on the sandstone that their silver voices struck; it was on the cliffs and crannies of his deep and unknown self.

The heavy stick shook with the grip of his hands, his hands that hated Peter. Marigold, his little girl, about whose life every root of his being turned, Marigold was stolen from him. He had loved her as unconsciously as the willow-wren loves Africa when the winter winds are in the sedges. His slow mind had not known it. His slow tongue had not spoken it. But now, too late, he understood. His quarrel with Peter was not that, being of 'the gentry' with 'money in pocket and money to come', he had used his superiority to dazzle Marigold. Nor was it that Peter was anticipating marriage. It was that he intuitively knew Peter's intention of marrying Catherine in the future. This secret and others were known to him and to the rest of the dependants at Dormer. Men are the toys of their underlings, who feed them and clothe them, wake them and put them to bed, knowing beneath the outer manner of subservience the autocracy of a child with its dolls. For he that supplies the stark human need, whether of body or spirit, is king of the world. Peter would marry Catherine and be well thought of. And what of Marigold? This was the core of his rage, but it was not the innermost core. Deeper than that lay the knowledge that Peter, in pushing him aside, had denied Marigold the best love. For he knew that Peter's affection for her was now, whatever it might be some day, a thing flimsy as a cobweb; and that his own love was genuine and solid as the heart of a young tree. Love which is only strong enough to increase the lover's happiness is a poor thing. The love that is worth giving is fire in the giver's hand, a thing of woe and insufferable ecstasy.

'Kill and swing for it, Enoch Gale! Kill and swing!' So cried a voice that came he knew not whence. The night wind stirred in the black tree, but it was not the night wind spoke. Was it the ancient mutter of the herd pasturing in the dead ages before it found a soul?

THE GROTTA

Suddenly Enoch flung the stick as far as his strength could send it. It fell crashing into the undergrowth.

Within, Marigold stirred.

'Hushee!' she whispered. 'I mun goo! There's summat bad in the 'ood!'

'Go? You shall never go.'

'Didna you hear the crackling? That was the ghosses breaking through from underground.'

'Silly! I'll take care of you.'

Enoch was running with clumsy haste away from the grotto, up hill, eyes shut to escape the red glow from the slit of a window. He plunged through the spinney of dead hollies, where the livid boles shone like unlit corpse candles. At last he came to the place called by Amber the Birds' Orchard. There in a grassy hollow beneath a crab-tree he flung himself upon his knees. The black, complex traceries of branch and twig came and went upon his upturned moonlit face with the flowing motion of water. All things below in the valley grew small, shrank to nothing. The voices of the owls, echoing among the glades, came up thinly; the song of the water sank to a low humming. Dormer lay far below; he could see its dim blur through the traceries of the mist-beaded woods like a sleeping creature curtained with dew-spangled cobwebs. Deep in mist was Dormer valley. Even the grotto was half obliterated. But here upon the open hill were no mists, no sounds, nothing to distract the spirit waiting attent and eager for what would come upon it out of the unfathomable.

Enoch spoke, and his voice with its tree music seemed to possess the air long after he had spoken.

'Dunna leave me stray in the dark night!' he said. 'I bin nought but a poor beast in a big pasture.'

Whether the comfort for which he waited was to come from beyond the stars, or from the mysterious hillside or from within himself, he did not trouble to ask. He simply waited in the silence, while the keen air fingered his face. It was one of those winter nights that mourn for Bethlehem — a night on which the spirit longs to traverse low green hills, strewn with sheep, under shaken gusts of music; a night on which to meet what is rarer to-day than a miracle — a few simple men caught in a spell of wonder; a night on which to reach at last a place low and small, full of sweet breath and the trampling of clear-eyed cattle, and holding, as the seed holds the tree, the very core of life. Alas, alas for us who in these latter days find the wan hills all silent and deserted, with none to beckon us to certain peace, with no noise of angels in the silver clouds.

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

Yet, when the solemn wind begins to move along the mountain, walking in the heavy trees; when every dewy leaf has a gleam of recognition for the wet-eyed stars, does there not come upon us a sweetness greater than the fragrance of flowers, a desire — passionate and vague — for a beauty that is not less real because its revelations are subtle and its essence beyond the reach of the senses?

It was for this that Enoch, all unconsciously, waited with upturned face caressed by shadows. It was on account of these hours of ecstasy that he was called 'simple'. It was by virtue of this strange sacrament of which he partook — a fruit that never apple-tree bore nor sun ripened — that he turned to go downhill again in the dim morning with a light in his face. He was not in aspect a likely candidate for sainthood. He shambled, and he wore, as usual in damp weather, an old potato sack draped over his shoulders. His eyes were full of grief, for he had seen joy go singing past, and he knew that it was lost to him. He was no more an ascetic than is any primitive creature. He was not of those whose spirits, cadaverous with long exile in material things, sit mournfully in the garden of earthly beauty, laying no finger on the rose and gold, waking the hollow echoes with the cry: 'All these shall perish!'

He wandered down towards the water. 'It'll be sobbin' wet to-morrow-day!' he said.

A laugh rang out in the forest, falling into the stream like a flower thrown from the tree-tops. The gibing echoes laughed lightly, elfishly.

'Eh, Marigol!' muttered Enoch, the sweat standing on his forehead so that the chill fingers of the breezes pricked him like electric needles.

They came, the two young lawless creatures, one loveless, down the quiet sloping path where the red elder leaves still hung. They came in the panoply of early physical beauty. But it was on Enoch, cloaked in his sack, leaden-eyed, dank with grief, that the greatest light of beauty rested.

When she saw him standing there, Marigold screamed, and the echoes screamed like frightened fairies. But it did not matter; if anyone heard they would not heed, for the woods were said to be haunted by shrieks. Not only were the voices of the hedgehog and the bat heard here, and that of the death's-head moth — a bewitched whisper — but legend said that here the mandrake cried, and that in this hollow of ancient greenery the voices of creatures trampled by the multitude lived within the echoes.

'Well?' said Peter, red and awkward and therefore blustering. 'What are you doing, spying here?'

'Sir, you best know what I'm here for.'

THE GROTTO

'Well?'

'To see our Marigol' righted.'

'Righted?' queried Peter with a forced laugh. Marigold had crept into the shadow of the elder tree where Enoch stood.

'I've yeard tell as you're to marry Miss Catherine one fine day,' said Enoch. 'No offence, Mister Peter.'

'Well, what if I do?'

'Miss Catherine's posy-ring wunna be bought with *your* gold,' said Enoch, with a flash in his brown eyes. 'If you come to Miss Catherine's chamber it'll be lover, not 'usband she'll call you.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean this-a-way, Master Peter. You'll wed our Marigol' to-morrow-day.'

'I won't.'

'Master Peter!' Enoch spoke sadly, reasonably, but with a latent anger. 'Master Peter! You've took my Marigol' off me. For you *was* my Marigol', my dear' — he turned to the weeping girl — 'and that you know. You've brought her low, Master Peter — ah! she'll be low in the eyes of men when this night's doings come to light.'

'Dunna say it, Enoch! Dunna say it!' cried Marigold.

'I mun say it to-night, my dear, and then never no more,' said Enoch. 'If so be you was fond of me, I'd marry you to-day in spite of all — marry you and love you true.'

She clung to his sleeve in a passion of grief.

'But seeing she dunna, and seeing as any bit of love she's got to give (for she is but young, Master Peter) is for you and no other, it 'ud be no manner use. So you'll marry our Marigol' to-morrowday.'

'I tell you I can't!'

Peter thought of his parents, of Catherine, of Ernest and the neighbours, of the wrath and laughter. Why, life would not be liveable at Dormer. And all for a servant — a very pretty servant, of course, but still only a servant. Marigold had now ceased to be wildly exciting. She was no longer forbidden fruit. The fire in him was slaked. But Catherine was still forbidden fruit. Catherine could send a rarefied excitement through his veins. There was something alluring in those long eyes of hers. No — he could not tie himself for life to this pretty little thing, so shrinking and so yielding. He had won her; she would soon bore him.

But Enoch's unmoved, equable voice broke in on him.

'You'll marry her to-morrowday, Master Peter. If pocket-money's short, I've got a bit saved for the licence and that.'

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

Peter stamped with rage.

'I won't! You can't make me!'

'Oh! I thought you was fond of me!' sobbed Marigold.

'If you dunna,' said Enoch stilly, 'you'll not see to-morrow's sun.'

Marigold screamed again, and again the echoes bandied the sound from one to another.

Peter looked dazed.

'It's this-a-way,' said Enoch. 'I dinna care for life now, not a farden. If you wunna do my bidding and right my girl, I'll drown you like a kitten in Dormer brook and hang for it.'

'Oh, God! Oh, God!' cried Marigold.

Peter's eyes looked dangerous.

'Dunna make 'un do it, Enoch, if he dunna want to!' pleaded Marigold.

'I be stronger than you,' said Enoch. 'I could break you in two, easy. And I'd do it.'

Suddenly Peter sprang at him, for his temper was up and meekness was not in him. But a grip of iron was on his arms in a moment; he was helpless in the grasp of muscles hardened by years of toil.

He realized defeat. He understood that Enoch was that invincible creature, a man who does not care whether he lives or dies. He made terms.

'Well, look here! If I do it, nobody's to know. She must go away —'

'Ah! I'll goo to my auntie's.'

Enoch looked at Peter with mingled scorn, envy and anger.

'Go away! You've a chance to be near Marigold and you say go away!' he murmured.

'Yes. She must go,' said Peter. 'Nobody must know.'

'Till when?'

'Never.'

'You'll come to a better mind. But still, if you'll go and see her now and again?'

'All right.'

'So be it!' said Enoch with a great sigh. 'But mind you, Master Peter, no randies. No goings on with Miss Catherine, or —' he gave a significant sideways nod towards the water.

Peter was aghast. That Enoch, of all people, should develop these murderous tendencies! Then he suddenly felt sorry for Enoch. He remembered the dancing firelight in the grotto, and the hawthorn freshness of Marigold. He turned to go. Then he came impulsively and boyishly back. 'Wish it hadn't happened,' he said gruffly.

THE GROTTO

'It inna your fault so much, lad, as the fault of the bitter old house,' said Enoch.

His voice rang over the water as they went across the bridge, and the house loomed up in the first sombre daylight. The mists, herded by a rising wind, passed before it like strange creatures with an uncertain wandering motion. Almost it seemed that the solid walls trembled, so that the watcher might expect at any moment a sliding collapse inevitably fated. For the falling of houses and cities and empires — all the solidities of man's invention — is not with a crash of masonry in the hour when all men flee. Years, centuries before the crowded humanity inhabiting them feels a flicker of disquiet, with less sound than a midge makes, they have fallen in the echoing soul under the owl-light of dreams.



THE BIRDS WILL SING

The birds will sing when I am gone
To stranger-folk with stranger-ways.
Without a break they'll whistle on
In close and flowery orchard deeps,
Where once I loved them, nights and days,
And never reck of one that weeps.

The bud that slept within the bark
When I was there, will break her bars —
A small green flame from out the dark —
And round into a world, and spread
Beneath the silver dews and stars.
Nor miss my bent, attentive head.

